

Fact Sheet

October 2009

H1N1 Influenza Advice for Out of the Cold Programs

Faith groups around Toronto operate Out of the Cold (OOTC) one night a week through the winter season, offering dinner/breakfast, social activities, and a place to sleep for homeless individuals. The H1N1 influenza virus is the predominant flu virus circulating in Toronto this season. The goal for OOTC programs is to take reasonable measures to decrease transmission while continuing to provide a temporary overnight “home” for those who don’t have one.

What is H1N1 flu virus?

The H1N1 flu virus causes a respiratory illness with symptoms such as fever, chills, cough, sore throat, headache, muscle aches, fatigue, and possibly nausea, vomiting, or diarrhea—just like seasonal flu (influenza).

How does the virus spread?

Influenza is transmitted from person to person. Coughs and sneezes release the flu virus into the air where it can be breathed in directly by others within six feet (2 metres). The virus can also rest on hard surfaces like counters and doorknobs where it can be picked up on hands and transmitted when a person touches their mouth, nose or eyes.

Can influenza be spread through food?

Influenza is not spread in or on food, and you cannot catch H1N1 by eating pork. Food safety is always important when you are preparing food for OOTC guests, but there is no need for cooks or servers to wear masks or take any different precautions because of H1N1 influenza. See the following link for general information about safe food handling practices www.toronto.ca/health/he/bs_index.htm

Should Out of the Cold programs operate this winter?

Toronto Public Health is not currently advising Out of the Cold programs to close due to H1N1 flu virus. The risk to guests from exposure if they are “sleeping rough” outside in winter weather is greater than the risk of them developing a severe case of H1N1 from potential H1N1 exposure at OOTC.

Is it safe to volunteer at an OOTC program?

If you are healthy enough to go out in public, there is no additional risk of catching H1N1 in OOTC sites. Practising common sense infection control precautions is always a good idea during every winter season. Vaccination can help to protect you from catching influenza, and may make it a milder illness if you do catch it. Check Toronto Public Health website (www.toronto.ca/health) for H1N1 immunization clinic information.

Should OOTC programs be screening people at the door, or turning away people who seem ill?

No. Toronto Public Health does not currently recommend active screening for influenza-like illness, or turning people away who appear ill. Active screening is not recommended for other public congregate settings either (movie theatres, buses, places of worship, grocery stores, or schools, for example).

What should we do if a guest has influenza symptoms?

Out of the Cold programs already have experience dealing with guests who are unwell or injured. As always, call an ambulance if someone needs immediate medical care. Otherwise, use ordinary infection control precautions (see below).

Encourage ill guests to seek medical care if necessary. OOTC coordinators know where outreach clinics for the homeless or other near-by medical care are located. Some OOTC programs may have volunteers who are health care workers, but OOTC programs are neither required nor intended to provide health care services.

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As well, you can encourage guests who might not otherwise go to a shelter to do so for a few days until they feel better. This way they can have a bed to recover in rather than having to spend each day on the move. Shelters have been advised to let ill residents stay in bed rather than send them out during the day. The Assessment and Referral Centre run by Toronto Shelter Housing and Support Division can help find a shelter bed (telephone 416-338-4766 / toll free 1-877-338-3398, 24 hours).

What can we do to decrease the spread of influenza in our OOTC program?

Here are some strategies:

- Provide alcohol-based hand sanitizer on-site. Foam hand sanitizer may be less likely to be misused than liquid sanitizer. Keep containers under supervision of volunteers, and encourage everyone to use it frequently – for example on entering and leaving the building, before and after eating, before playing cards or board games (ie handling shared objects), before settling for the night and after using tissues. The product brand does not matter, but ensure that whatever product you use has at least 60% alcohol content.
- Sneeze or cough into your sleeve, not your hands, or use a tissue. Have tissues available and encourage people to clean their hands after using the tissue. You can also have a box of surgical masks to offer any guests who are coughing a lot, though not everyone will be able to tolerate keeping them on for long periods. Toronto Public Health does not recommend guests or volunteers use N95 masks.
- Separate people who have influenza-like symptoms from others as possible. Some sites may have a separate room; others are planning to use office baffles or other temporary barriers to separate part of the room overnight. Placing mattresses head-to-foot will also give more distance between people.
- Clean high-touch surfaces more often, such as door handles and table tops. Ordinary household cleaners work well.

What precautions can volunteers take?

The best prevention is vaccination. Information on immunization clinics for H1N1 influenza and for seasonal influenza can be found on Toronto Public Health's website. In addition, follow these other steps to help prevent the flu:

- Sneeze and cough into your sleeve, not your hands, if you don't have a tissue
- Wash your hands often and thoroughly, at least 15 seconds, with soap and warm water or hand sanitizer
- Avoid touching your eyes, mouth and nose
- Stay home if you are ill
- Take care of your health—eat a healthy, balanced diet and remain active

Where can I get more information?

- Toronto Public Health
- TeleHealth Ontario
- Ontario Ministry of Health and Long-Term Care
- Public Health Agency of Canada

toronto.ca/health or 416-338-7600

1-866-797-0000

health.gov.on.ca

phac-aspc.gc.ca or 1-800-454-8302