

Questions and answers about an influenza pandemic

Is influenza vaccination important?

Regular influenza outbreaks over and above the burden of a new pandemic variant would threaten to overtax the capacity of both health professionals and the health care system.

In the inter-pandemic period, regular flu shots help to keep you, your family and your staff healthier. Flu immunization also reduces the risk that you may infect more vulnerable patients with flu. High rates of regular flu vaccination prior to a pandemic outbreak also help maintain more capacity for vaccine manufacture and delivery during a pandemic.

Can physicians be conscripted in a public health emergency?

Yes, although the government would only resort to this measure in extremely dire circumstances. Section 52 of the *Public Health Act* does give the Alberta government power to declare a public health emergency on advice from the chief medical officer.

Powers granted in a public health emergency enable a minister or regional health authority (RHA) to “authorize or require any qualified person to render aid of a type the person is qualified to provide” and “authorize the conscription of persons needed to meet an emergency.” This would include physicians who are retired.

Section 66.1 also provides protection from liability for health practitioners who act in good faith.

What infection control measures are useful for physician practices?

From experience, it is reasonable to expect that a new pandemic will spread primarily in the community rather than in health-care settings. See the end of this document for links to more information.

- Establishing good, basic infection control practices now is a key step in preparing to cope with any eventual pandemic outbreak in the community.
- Next to immunization, the single most important way to prevent influenza spread is proper hand washing.
- Patients attending ambulatory settings for concerns related to influenza-like illness (ILI) should be assessed according to an ILI assessment tool. Depending on office layout, options for policies for separating patients might include:
 - (1) minimizing time patients spend in a waiting room
 - (2) having a separate entrance for those with ILI
 - (3) placing patients with ILI in a separate room
 - (4) establishing a minimum 1-metre spatial distance between patients with ILI in one area of the waiting room and non-ILI patients in another area as well as between reception staff and patients.
- Follow normal biomedical waste management guidelines. Other than logical added precautions of minimizing hand contact, special handling of linen or waste contaminated with secretions from patients suspected of having or confirmed to have influenza is not normally advocated.

How can I prepare my practice for a possible pandemic?

One key step is to identify and prepare workers who can substitute for absent personnel (e.g., part-time workers, medical assistants, retirees, family members, students).

A number of practical sample checklists have been published for community-based practice. Work is also occurring at the Canadian Medical Association level to develop a simple business continuity tool for community practice.

How can I prepare myself and my family for a possible pandemic?

The Physician Family Support Program (PFSP) can assist physicians to find a family physician if you do not have one. Contact PFSP at 1.877.767.4637.

Many physicians have disability insurance coverage available after a 30-day to 90-day waiting period. More information about disability insurance may be obtained from ADIUM Insurance Services at 780.482.0692, TF 1.800.272.9680, ext. 692 or insurance@albertadoctors.org.

How will physicians receive direction and information in the event of a pandemic?

Planning is currently occurring at all levels. The Provincial Health Office will have a command centre, as will each RHA, to manage the Alberta response at provincially coordinated and local levels.

The federal government will provide national oversight for surveillance, international liaison and coordination of vaccine distribution.

The College of Physicians and Surgeons of Alberta is expected to serve as the main channel for communicating essential information to all Alberta physicians as need dictates. The AMA will likely fill the role of portal for linking to other sources for updates about the pandemic and for issues affecting physician health and well-being.

Links and available documents:

- ***Infection control***

For recommended practices, see the following sources:

(1) College of Physicians and Surgeons for best practice standards: <http://www.cpsa.ab.ca>

(2) *Guidelines for Infection Prevention & Control in the Physician's Office* (BC Centre for Disease Control): http://www.bccdc.org/downloads/pdf/lab/reports/Infection_Control_In_Physician_Office_Final.pdf

- ***Handwashing***

For a small reminder poster for your office, see sample from Capital Health.

http://www.capitalhealth.ca/AboutUs/ResourceLibrary/Other/CoverYourCough/Handwashing_adult_poster

- ***ILI assessment tool***

(1) Initial basic triage tool – Annex F, *Canadian Pandemic Influenza Plan for the Health Sector*, pg 77

http://www.phac-aspc.gc.ca/cpip-pclcpi/pdf-e/15-CPIP-Appendix-F-Infection-Control_e.pdf

(2) Samples of clinical management assessment tools – Annex G of the *Plan*, pg 52

http://www.phac-aspc.gc.ca/cpip-pclcpi/pdf-e/16-CPIP-Appendix-G-Clinical_e.pdf

- ***Biomedical waste***

For a copy of the *Guide to Management of Biomedical Waste Generated in Physicians' Offices* published by the Health Issues Council of the AMA, visit <http://www.albertadoctors.org/bcm/ama/ama-website.nsf/AllDoc/5D4154D18CDBCACB8725714100510519?OpenDocument>

- ***Sample office checklists***

(1) Family Medicine Department, Calgary Health Region, "Pandemic Preparedness Information for Community Physicians"

http://www.calgaryhealthregion.ca/familymedicine/reg_programs_pp.html

(2) *BC Medical Journal*, June 2007, pg 266 ("Checklist for physician offices")

<http://www.bcmj.org/print/1341>

Please check the AMA website periodically for new developments and new sources of information, as they become available, related to physician issues in pandemic influenza preparedness.

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