

## INFLUENZA

A seasonal concern with worry of a future pandemic rivalling the “big one” of 1918.



*The history of influenza is a dramatic one. In 1918-19, there was a flu epidemic (the “Spanish Flu”), which killed at least 21 million people worldwide, 30,000 in Canada alone. It was the most devastating epidemic in history. It killed more people than all the wars in the 20th Century. There have been other epidemics like the Asian flu of 1957 and the Hong Kong flu of 1968 and most recently the avian flu of 1997, which came back in 1999. Due to vaccination and better medical care, none of these epidemics were as serious as the one in 1918.*

*Epidemiologists keep saying we are due for “big one”; that we are actually overdue. No one knows for sure when it is coming but when it does, it will be a worldwide epidemic. With the speed of airline travel today, our world is much smaller and infections can spread very quickly.*

### What is the flu and how do we get it?

Influenza (flu) is a highly contagious viral infection that causes the sickness and death of thousands of people worldwide every year. The elderly are most impacted since many of them have underlying illnesses making them more susceptible to the virus. Immunization against the flu is available each year and is recommended for many specific groups of people.

The flu virus is constantly changing so that each year there are new strains evolving. Virologists develop new vaccines each year based on information from the previous season. Sometimes they get it right; other times less so.

**HOW IS FLU SPREAD?** The main method of transmission is through airborne droplets, by direct human contact (shaking hands is not the best method of greeting during the flu season), and through direct contact with contaminated objects. The main message here is: *wash your hands often throughout the day and keep your hands away from your nose and mouth.*

The flu virus can survive on a telephone, countertop or doorknobs for 24 to 48 hours, on paper tissues and clothing for 8 to 10 hours and on skin and hands for up to 5 minutes. It doesn't take long for the virus to infect. A simple act of shaking hands with someone already infected, a quick scratch of your nose with your finger and you may have inoculated yourself with the flu virus. The flu shot is a way of imparting protection.

**DOES FLU VACCINE WORK?** This question is debated each fall. People know that choosing the right strains for the current vaccine is not right on the target every year. However, even in years when the vaccine content is not perfect, it will still provide some protection. It is certainly better than no vaccine at all.

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