

King County Emergency Preparedness

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Preventing spread of influenza

Most patients with pandemic influenza will be able to remain at home during the course of their illness and can be cared for by others who live in the household. This information is intended to help you recognize the symptoms of influenza and care for ill persons in the home, both during a typical influenza season and during an influenza pandemic.

At the outset of an influenza pandemic, a vaccine for the pandemic flu virus will not be available for several months. However, it's still a good idea to get a seasonal flu vaccine to protect from seasonal flu viruses (see [Influenza Vaccine Information Sheet](#)).

Know the symptoms of influenza, which may include:

- Sudden onset of illness
- Fever higher than 100.4° F (38° C)
- Chills
- Cough
- Headache
- Sore throat
- Stuffy nose
- Muscle aches
- Feeling of weakness and/or exhaustion
- Diarrhea, vomiting, abdominal pain (occur more commonly in children)

Prevent the spread of illness in the home

Because influenza can spread easily from person to person, anyone living in or visiting a home where someone has influenza can become infected. For this reason, it is important to take steps to prevent the spread of influenza to others in the home.

What caregivers can do

Physically separate influenza patients from other people as much as possible. When practical, the ill person should stay in a separate room where others do not enter. Other people living in the home should limit contact with the ill person as much as possible.

Designate one person in the household as the main caregiver for the ill person. Ideally, this caregiver should be healthy and not have medical conditions that would put him or her at risk for severe influenza disease. Medical conditions that are considered “high risk” include the following:

- Pregnancy
- Diabetes
- Heart problems
- Kidney disease
- Disease or treatment that suppresses the immune system
- Chronic lung disease, including asthma, emphysema, cystic fibrosis, chronic bronchitis, bronchiectasis and tuberculosis (TB)
- Age over 65.

Watch for influenza symptoms in other household members

If possible, contact your health care provider if you have questions about caring for the ill person. However, it may be difficult to contact your usual healthcare provider during a severe influenza pandemic. Public Health – Seattle & King County’s pandemic flu website (listed below) will provide frequent updates, including how to get medical advice. If special telephone hotlines are used, these numbers will also be on the website and announced through the media.

Wearing surgical masks (with ties) or procedure masks (with ear loops) may be useful in decreasing spread of influenza when worn by the patient and/or caregiver during close contact (within 3 feet). If masks are worn, to be useful they must be worn at all times when in close contact with the patient. The wearing of gloves and gowns is not recommended for household members providing care in the home.

What everyone in the household can do

- Wash hands with soap and water or, if soap and water are not available, use an alcohol-based hand cleanser (like Purell® or a store-brand) after each contact with an influenza patient or with objects in the area where the patient is located. Cleaning your hands is the single best preventive measure for everyone in the household.
- Don’t touch your eyes, nose, or mouth without first washing your hands for 20 seconds. Wash hands before and after using the bathroom.
- Wash soiled dishes and eating utensils either in a dishwasher or by hand with warm water and soap. It’s not necessary to separate eating utensils used by a patient with influenza.

- Laundry can be washed in a standard washing machine with warm or cold water and detergent. It is not necessary to separate soiled linen and laundry used by a patient with influenza from other household laundry. Do not grasp the laundry close to your body or face, in order to avoid contamination. Wash hands with soap and water after handling soiled laundry.
- Place tissues used by the ill patient in a bag and throw them away with other household waste. Consider placing a bag at the bedside for this purpose.
- Clean counters, surfaces and other areas in the home regularly using everyday cleaning products.

Prevent the spread of illness in the community

Stay at home if you are sick. Ill persons should not leave the home until they have recovered because they can spread the infection to others. In a typical influenza season, persons with influenza should avoid contact with others for about 5 days after onset of the illness. During an influenza pandemic, public health authorities will provide information on how long persons with influenza should remain at home.

If the ill person must leave home (such as for medical care), he or she should wear a surgical or procedure mask, if available, and should be sure to take the following steps:

- Cover the mouth and nose when coughing and sneezing, using tissues or the crook of the elbow instead of the hands.
- Use tissues to contain mucous and watery discharge from the mouth and nose.
- Dispose of tissues in the nearest waste bin after use or carry a small plastic bag (like a zip-lock bag) for used tissues.
- Wash hands with soap and water or use an alcohol-based hand cleanser after covering your mouth for a cough or sneeze, after wiping or blowing your nose, and after handling contaminated objects and materials, including tissues.

During an influenza pandemic, only people who are essential for patient care or support should enter a home where someone is ill with pandemic influenza unless they have already had influenza.

If other persons must enter the home, they should avoid close contact with the patient and use the infection control precautions recommended on this sheet.

This guidance is based on current information from the U.S. Department of Health & Human Services Pandemic Influenza Plan and is subject to change. Up-to-date guidance will be available from your healthcare provider and at these websites:

- [Public Health - Seattle & King County, Pandemic Flu Response](#)
- [How to Care for Someone with Influenza](#)