

Ministry of Health

Office of Chief Medical Officer of Health,
Public Health

Health Protection and Surveillance Policy and
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September 20, 2022

Dear Swine Industry Stakeholder:

I am writing to recommend that you and your family get vaccinated against influenza (“flu”) this year. The recent outbreaks of avian flu and the on-going COVID-19 pandemic make it even more critical that you and your family are protected against flu.

Flu vaccination recommendations for all Ontarians:

Flu vaccines are offered free to Ontarians over the age of six months who live, work, or attend school in Ontario, and are recommended for the general population.

Vaccination helps to prevent the spread of flu viruses through the community and protects individuals who may be at greater risk of serious complications from the flu, such as pregnant people and those with chronic illnesses. Being vaccinated against the flu can help prevent serious outcomes. It also can reduce your chances of being infected with COVID-19 and the flu at the same time, which could lead to more serious complications. In most people, flu vaccines can safely be given at the same time as COVID-19 boosters, or at any time before or after (<https://www.canada.ca/en/public-health/services/publications/vaccines-immunization/canadian-immunization-guide-statement-seasonal-influenza-vaccine-2022-2023.html#a4.5>).

Flu vaccination recommendations for swine workers:

While we encourage everyone in Ontario to get vaccinated, we are also recommending that workers in the swine industry, in particular, get vaccinated because of the evidence that human flu viruses can infect and cause disease in pigs and other animals, as well as people.

The flu strains covered by the vaccine are primarily human community-based infections, meaning that you are most likely to get this flu from coming into contact with infected individuals in your community. However, preventing the movement of flu viruses between the human and animal populations is an important public health measure aimed at trying to prevent the reassortment or mixing of different flu strains to produce new flu viruses, which could cause significant disease in both people and animals.

Swine workers who get the flu vaccine will help to reduce the potential for human flu viruses mixing with flu viruses commonly found in Ontario's swine herds and help to keep the human viruses out of Ontario's swine herds.

Although it is unusual for individuals to get flu infections directly from livestock, personal protective equipment should be worn when working with sick swine to prevent infection, as occasional human infections have been reported. Individuals co-infected with two or more different flu viruses can also serve as mixing vessels for these viruses, leading to the emergence of novel viruses.

The Ministry of Health (MOH) has worked with government partners to develop guidance to help prevent the transmission of flu from animals to people. These documents are available in pdf format at https://www.health.gov.on.ca/en/pro/programs/emb/avian/Avian_Influenza_PPE_Guidelines_for_Poultry_Workers_June_2022.pdf.

Swine workers who develop flu-like illness:

Individuals with flu-like symptoms (fever, cough, sore throat, muscle aches and, in some cases, eye infections and pneumonia) should, if possible, be kept out of animal kennel areas and away from shelter animals until 24 hours after their symptoms have resolved (48 hours for those with gastrointestinal symptoms).

The MOH has developed a poster which producers can print out and use at entry points to barns to help screen individuals/employees who may be infected with flu before they enter swine barns. Electronic versions of this poster, in two size formats, are available as attachments to this letter.

Individuals who develop flu-like symptoms after working with swine that show signs of respiratory illness should seek medical attention and advise their health care provider of their exposure to ill pigs.

Practice Good Personal Hygiene:

Public health measures recommended to protect against COVID-19 may also help to protect against the flu.

The MOH also recommends that everyone, not just animal shelter workers, incorporate these simple steps into daily routines:

- wash hands frequently and thoroughly with soap and warm running water after handling birds and before eating or drinking
- cover your mouth and nose with a tissue when you sneeze, dispose of the tissue immediately, and then clean your hands (e.g., with an alcohol-based rub)
- if you don't have a tissue, cough, or sneeze into your upper sleeve – not into your hands
- avoid sharing food, eating utensils, towels, or handkerchiefs

- keep an alcohol-based hand rub (gel or wipes) handy at work, home, and in your vehicle

The MOH is working closely with the Ontario Ministry of Agriculture, Food and Rural Affairs (OMAFRA) to reduce the risk of flu transmission between humans and livestock. If you have any human health questions, please contact your primary care provider or your local public health unit. If you have concerns about your livestock, please contact OMAFRA and/or your veterinarian.

We appreciate your assistance in helping to protect everyone in Ontario from flu.

For more information on getting the flu vaccine, speak to your doctor, nurse practitioner, public health unit or pharmacist. To find a flu vaccination clinic near you, please contact your local public health unit (a list of local public health units can be found at http://www.health.gov.on.ca/english/public/contact/phu/phuloc_mn.html).

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read 'RL', is positioned above the typed name.

Robert Lerch
A/Director

Attachment