Ministry of Health

Ministère de la Santé

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Dear Poultry Industry Stakeholder:

I am writing to recommend that you and your family get vaccinated against influenza this year. The COVID-19 pandemic makes it even more critical that you and your family are protected against influenza.

Flu vaccination recommendations for all Ontarians:

Flu vaccines are offered free to all 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 these flu viruses through the community and protects individuals who may be at greater risk of serious complications from the flu, such as pregnant women and those with chronic illnesses.

Flu vaccination recommendations for poultry workers:

While we encourage everyone in Ontario to get vaccinated, we are also recommending that those in the poultry industry, in particular, get vaccinated because of the evidence that human flu viruses can infect and cause disease in birds and other animals, as well as people. In past years, Ontario commercial poultry flocks have tested positive for the pH1N1 influenza virus, which causes human respiratory illness and can be transmitted to poultry.

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 influenza viruses between human and bird populations is an important public health measure aimed at trying to prevent the reassortment or mixing of different flu strains to produce new influenza viruses, which could cause significant disease in both people and birds. We are sending a similar letter to swine industry workers.

Poultry workers who get the flu vaccine will help reduce the potential for an avian flu virus mixing with these human influenza viruses, and help to keep the human viruses out of Ontario's flocks. With the initial arrival of highly pathogenic H5N2 avian influenza viruses in Ontario in 2015, and other avian influenza outbreaks occurring since then, this is becoming increasingly important.

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

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Poultry workers who develop influenza-like illness:

Individuals with influenza-like symptoms (fever, cough, sore throat, muscle aches and, in some cases, eye infections and pneumonia) should, if possible, be kept out of poultry barns and away from bird flocks until seven days after their symptoms have resolved. As COVID-19 has similar symptoms to influenza, ill individuals should self-isolate, contact their health care provider and seek testing for COVID-19. Those with a positive test, or have symptoms but don't get tested, should follow COVID-19 public health advice, including self-isolating for 10 days.

The Ministry of Health (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 influenza before they enter poultry barns. Electronic versions of this poster, in two size formats, are available as attachments to this letter.

Individuals who develop influenza-like symptoms after working with poultry showing signs of respiratory illness should seek medical attention and advise their health care provider of their exposure to ill poultry.

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 poultry 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 wash your hands
- 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 sanitizer (gel or wipes) handy at work, home and in your vehicle
- maintain physical distancing from others (2 meters or 6 feet) and wear a face mask when distancing isn't possible

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

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

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,

Nina Arron
Director

Attachment