

Ministry of Health

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Boîte à lettres 12

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October 15, 2024

Dear Poultry 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 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.

Flu vaccination recommendations for poultry workers:

In response to the on-going influenza A(H5N1) outbreaks in the United States of America, Canada’s National Advisory Committee on Immunization (NACI) has highlighted the importance of seasonal flu vaccines for the 2024-2025 flu season for all people working around birds and mammals (<https://www.canada.ca/en/public-health/services/publications/vaccines-immunization/national-advisory-committee-immunization-statement-seasonal-influenza-vaccine-2024-2025.html>). This includes, but is not limited to, poultry, agricultural support personnel, and processing plant workers, all of which have been identified as particularly important seasonal flu vaccine recipients by NACI.

The flu strains covered by the vaccine are 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 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 flu viruses, which could cause significant disease in both people and birds.

Poultry workers who get the flu vaccine will help reduce the potential for an avian flu virus mixing with these human flu viruses and help to keep the human viruses out of Ontario's flocks. This is particularly important as additional cases of avian H5N1 are expected this fall and winter, which would overlap with the anticipated human flu season in Ontario.

Although it is unusual for individuals to get flu infections directly from birds, personal protective equipment 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 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 poultry to people. These documents are available in pdf format at

<https://www.ontario.ca/page/highly-pathogenic-avian-influenza-recommendations-personal-protective-equipment-workers-and>.

Poultry 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 barns and away from birds 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 poultry 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 poultry showing signs of respiratory illness should seek medical attention and advise their health care provider of their exposure to ill birds.

Practice Good Personal Hygiene:

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 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, 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 Agribusiness (OMAFRA) to reduce the risk of flu transmission between humans, poultry flocks 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 flock, please contact OMAFA and 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,

Originally signed by

Jodi Melnychuk
Director

Attachment



Clean Your Hands

Respiratory illnesses like the flu spread easily between people and animals.

Read Carefully

1. Do you have a **NEW** cough or one that has become **WORSE**?
2. Are you **SHORT** of **BREATH**?
3. Are you feeling **FEVERISH**?

If the answer to **ANY** of these questions is **YES**, please contact local facility management at _____ **before** proceeding further.