

Ministry of Health

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October 15, 2024

To Those Interacting with Wildlife:

I am writing to recommend that you and your team get vaccinated against influenza (“flu”) this year. The recent outbreaks of avian flu make it even more important 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 from contracting the disease.

Flu vaccination recommendations for those interacting with wild birds and mammals:

In response to the on-going influenza A(H5N1) outbreaks in the United States of America, , Canada’s National Advisory Committee on Immunization 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>).

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 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. We are sending a similar letter to animal shelters and livestock industry workers in the agricultural sector.

Although it is unusual for individuals to get flu infections directly from animals, personal protective equipment should be worn when working with sick animals to prevent infection.

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

Recommendations for those 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 away from live animals until 24 hours after their symptoms have resolved (48 hours for those with gastrointestinal symptoms).

The MOH has developed a poster which wildlife rehabilitation centres can print out and use at entry points to animal housing areas to help screen individuals/employees who may be infected with flu before they enter. 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 animals showing signs of respiratory illness should seek medical attention and advise their health care provider of their exposure to sick animals.

Practice Good Personal Hygiene:

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 animals 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 Natural Resources to reduce the risk of flu transmission between humans and wild birds and animals. If you have any human health questions, please contact your primary care provider or your local public health unit. If you have concerns about the animals in your care, please contact 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.