

WRHA - Preparing for Pandemic

INFLUENZA

H1N1 RELATED STRESS: *Talking with Patients and their Families*

Family Physicians have an important role in assisting the public to manage their questions, concerns and stress about the H1N1 pandemic.

The novel and sustained nature of the challenges of a pandemic may overwhelm some individuals and/or groups' ability to cope effectively. Individuals may experience a broad range of emotional reactions to the H1N1 pandemic and the psychological consequences will vary across severity and duration.

Your role in normalizing the reactions of individuals and their families, given their circumstances, will provide comfort and diminish stress.

PHYSICAL

Sleep disruption or fatigue, changes in eating or appetite, gastrointestinal upset, tremors, chest pain, dizziness, headaches, back pain.

BEHAVIOURAL

Avoidance, using substances to cope, reluctance to rest .

EMOTIONAL

Anxiety, fear, feeling overwhelmed, angry, irritable, hopeless, helpless, crying spells, easily startled.

COGNITIVE

Memory loss, difficulties with decision-making, poor concentration.

HELPFUL STRATEGIES

- Encourage individuals to stay informed through reliable sources (see below) but limit their exposure to media (as constant media coverage about flu pandemic can be frightening and overwhelming.)
- Provide a safe and reassuring environment for their concerns to be addressed. Encourage patients to talk about their concerns. Provide accurate and balanced information to alleviate concerns and prevent further stress.
- Encourage individuals to rely on effective coping skills and practices they have used in the past during times of stress. For example, reaching out to others, maintaining a positive outlook, practicing positive self-care such as proper nutrition, maintaining sleep and exercise.
- Provide information on flu prevention and encourage individuals to be a positive role models or support persons to their family, friends and co-workers. The public fares best during a public health crisis when they have a positive and constructive role to play.

Remind patients that all levels of government have plans in place on how to deal with a pandemic. For example, patients may need reassurance that the Public Health Agency of Canada has gathered best practice evidence and does not recommend testing every individual for H1N1 when flu symptoms are present.



BE AWARE

Certain groups may be at greater risk physically and emotionally during a pandemic: economically disadvantaged, socially isolated, physically disabled, the elderly, First Nations people, pregnant women and children, those with psychiatric illness, or people with language or communication needs including recent immigrants. Members of these groups may require additional support and guidance, and may benefit from connecting with others in their community who share their experiences.

While most people will cope with the additional stress of H1N1 pandemic, some individuals may experience severe distress, mental health concerns or an exacerbation of mental illness symptoms.



Indicators that someone is not coping well and may need mental health evaluation or other mental health services:

- Inability to perform necessary everyday functions
- Inability to make simple decisions
- Ritualistic behaviour (repetitive, non-productive behaviour)
- Significant disturbance of memory
- Extreme withdrawal and/or isolation
- Abuse of alcohol or drugs
- Suicidal or homicidal hints or talk
- Hallucinations
- Paranoia
- Disorientation to time and place
- Serious developmental regression

Individuals who show these indicators should be referred to a psychologist, counsellor, Employee Assistance Program or other mental health professional.

People experiencing a psychosocial or mental health crisis can self-refer or be referred to WRHA Mobile Crisis Services (24 hours) at 940-1781.

A TIP SHEET FOR THE PUBLIC ON COPING WITH H1N1 FLU IS AVAILABLE AT www.gov.mb.ca/flu

FOR MORE INFORMATION:

Health Links – Info Sante

788-8200 or 1-888-315-9257

Winnipeg Regional Health Authority

www.wrha.mb.ca

Manitoba Health and Healthy Living

www.gov.mab.ca/flu

Public Health Agency of Canada

www.phac-aspc.gc.ca



Winnipeg Regional
Health Authority
Caring for Health

Office régional de la
santé de Winnipeg
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