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Coping with Concerns about the H1N1 Influenza A Virus and Pandemics: Information for Canadians¹

Disasters and infectious diseases, like any life stressor, challenge the way we cope. Whether we learn about them on television or experience them personally, we can feel upset, fearful and anxious as a result, both for our own personal safety and that of our family, friends and community. Stressful events can also bring up feelings and memories of previous traumatic events thereby compounding the distress that we feel.

The H1N1 Influenza A virus (human swine flu) is one such infectious illness that currently poses some risk to public health and challenges all of us to cope with this risk. It is important to remember that it is normal to be emotionally affected by events like disasters and wide-spread illnesses, and that there are steps we can take to help us cope.

The information that follows is intended to help people cope psychologically in the face of health risks like the H1N1 flu virus. It does not convey important information that you should know about how the virus is contracted, its signs and symptoms, how to decrease your risk of contracting the virus and how the virus is treated. **You are well advised to obtain this important and up to date information about the H1N1 Flu Virus by visiting the Public Health Agency of Canada (PHAC) website at http://www.phac-aspc.gc.ca/alert-alerte/swine_200904-eng.php.**

Who is Vulnerable?

Certain factors may put people at greater risk for contracting an illness. For the H1N1 flu virus, travel to Mexico was one such risk factor because that is where the first human cases were reported. Other risk factors for contracting viruses like H1N1 are being an infant or elderly person, having pre-existing health problems, and/or living in poor economic or social conditions.

Many more people are affected psychologically by the risk posed by an illness such as the H1N1 flu virus than will actually develop the illness. People who tend to worry – particularly about their health, or who have experienced a previous or recent traumatic event, who live alone or have few social supports are more likely to experience psychological distress when faced with a stressor such as the recent concerns about the spread of the H1N1 flu virus.

¹ Some of information adapted from the Public Health Agency of Canada brochure, *Responding to Stressful Events: Taking Care of Ourselves, Our Families and Our Communities*.

Assessing and Coping with Risk

- Staying informed and consulting experts can help you to most accurately assess your personal risk of getting physically sick. Consult expert sources such as infectious disease practitioners, family physicians or nurse practitioners, public health hotlines, or government websites (such as Health Canada, Public Health Agency of Canada, and the World Health Organization) for information.
- Follow the health and safety guidelines of such agencies as the Public Health Agency of Canada and Health Canada to minimize your risk of contracting the virus. In the case of infectious disease, it is important to protect against infection by cleaning one's hands. Proper hand washing involves:
 - Cleaning one's hands regularly
 - Washing one's hands with soap and water, and drying them thoroughly
 - Using alcohol-based hand-rubs when immediate access to soap and water is not available.
 - Proper hand washing takes about as long as singing "Happy Birthday" twice, which is a helpful guide in getting children to properly wash their hands – see the WHO website for images on proper hand-washing techniques.²
- Remember that the media reports things that go wrong or exceptional events more often than things that go right or common events. We hear about and pay more attention to the few people who might have been made very sick or even died from an illness than we do about the many more people who successfully recovered from an illness.
- Remember that you need to balance gathering information and heeding safety guidelines to reduce risk with not letting the gathering of information or the attention to safety guidelines unduly preoccupy you. If you have become unable to carry out your usual roles and responsibilities at work, school or home because of your pre-occupation with a stressor, this might be a sign of psychological distress for which you need help.

Things to Keep in Mind about Stress

It is important to remember that:

- People are strong and resilient
- Everyone faces stressors in their lifetimes and generally have the skills they need to cope
- Reassuring others and receiving reassurance about safety and the steps being taken to protect people's safety are very important to coping well
- Not everyone reacts to the same event in the same way and not everyone shows their distress in the same way
- The ways in which children and communities cope and react to a stressor are very influenced by how parents, caregivers and community leaders cope and react

² See http://www.who.int/gpsc/clean_hands_protection/en/index.html

Taking Care under Times of Stress

Taking care of yourself:

- Take breaks from thinking and talking about the stressful event
- Take time to relax and exercise
- Talk about your thoughts and feelings with family, friends, co-workers, teachers, spiritual advisors, health professionals or community leaders
- Maintain as normal a routine as possible
- Avoid using alcohol or drugs to numb your feelings
- Try to eat well and get a good night's sleep

Taking care of your family:

Disasters or the threat of illness can be particularly upsetting to children and teenagers. It is important to discuss these issues and give them the opportunity to talk about their concerns. It is important to tell them the truth, to reassure them and to let them know that they can count on you and the adults around them.

If you do notice your child or teenager's behaviour has changed significantly at home or at school, discuss the situation with them. Behaviours or behavioural changes such as the ones below might also suggest a need to contact a regulated health care professional for additional help.

- Sleeping too much or too little
- Being tired all the time
- Staying in their room or avoiding others
- Talking less
- Feeling cranky and irritable
- More arguments and fights with others
- Behaviour problems at home, at school or in the community
- Appetite changes (eating more or less)
- Feeling sad or anxious
- Poor grades

When Psychological Distress Becomes Too Much

Stressors such as the risk of illness associated with a pandemic will affect all people differently. We can be affected psychologically (e.g. feeling worried), as well as physically (e.g. sleeping poorly) though most of us will not actually contract the illness. Stressors that are beyond our personal control are especially difficult to cope with well. Signs and symptoms that might signal a psychological problem or disorder for which professional help might be a good idea include:

- Sleeping poorly, too much or too little
- Avoiding others
- Experiencing headaches, stomach problems, neck or back pain
- Crying
- Talking less
- Feeling anxious, depressed or having panic attacks
- Feeling angry, guilty, helpless, numb or confused
- Thinking about or watching too much television on H1N1 or pandemics

- Not wanting to get out of bed or leave the house
- Having difficulties concentrating
- Excessive eating
- Drinking more alcohol or taking more prescription drugs
- Having little patience
- Feeling overprotective of loved ones
- Nervous about leaving home or travelling

It is important to remember that most of us have had some of the signs and symptoms listed above at one time or another. If you have a number of these signs and symptoms and they

- persist beyond a couple of weeks
- persist to the point where you are not able to carry out your usual routines at home, work or in the community,
- are accompanied by intense feelings of despair or helplessness or suicidal thoughts

you are well advised to consult a regulated health care professional such as a your family physician, a nurse practitioner, a psychologist, or psychiatrist.

For more information about coping with fear or about consulting a psychologist, contact cpa@cpa.ca.