



Do you have a “flu buddy”? Someone who will look after you and/or your family should you or they become sick with the H1N1 flu this fall or winter?

Many of us are lucky enough to have spouses, family or friends to care for us when we are sick at home — you know, the person who brings you hot cups of tea, buys the groceries, looks after the kids, and lets you rest in bed and concentrate on getting well.

With millions of single-parent families in Canada and millions of others living alone, having a flu buddy is the sort of low-key practical recommendation that could make a big difference in an H1N1 pandemic and prevent it from overwhelming our health-care system.

With fears about the scope and severity of the H1N1 pandemic hitting the headlines on a regular basis, the concept of a flu buddy may seem a little mundane. But the Public Health Agency of Canada (PHAC) tells us that it's important for you to “talk with family, friends and neighbours and figure out how you might help each other during the H1N1 pandemic.”

“Identify elderly or vulnerable relatives, friends and neighbours who may need your help,” the PHAC told Canwest Media. Helping someone who has the flu and is sick at home alone could save him or her from having to visit the emergency room or become so sick as to require hospitalization.

This low-tech, common sense recommendation won't make front-page news, but it's something you need to really pay attention to if and when the pandemic hits Canada.

Forget wearing a surgical mask on public transit, fighting to get at the front of the line for a flu vaccine if you're not at high risk, or using antiviral drugs for protection against becoming infected.

Here are practical tips from the experts on minimizing the impact of the virus on yourself and your family.

To prevent getting H1N1 in the first place...

- Wash your hands thoroughly with soap and warm

water several times a day. Use a hand sanitizer if a sink is not available.

- Cough and sneeze into your arm or sleeve, or use a disposable tissue (not a handkerchief) and throw it away after use.
- Keep doing what you normally do, but stay home and avoid other people if you get flu symptoms such as fever, body aches, runny or stuffy nose, sore throat, nausea, vomiting or diarrhea.
- If you have a severe bout of flu, seek medical care. A doctor can determine whether you belong to a high-risk group and need flu testing or whether you are a candidate for treatment.
- Pay attention to advisories from official sources, especially public health authorities in your area.

If you are caring for someone with the flu at home, experts recommend the following steps.

- Separate the person from others as much as reasonably possible.
- Cover your mouth and nose when caring for the sick person — for example, wear a surgical mask (available in most pharmacies).
- Wash your hands with soap and warm water thoroughly after each contact with the sick person.
- Improve the air flow. Use doors and windows to take advantage of breezes.
- Keep the home environment clean with readily available household cleaning agents such as bleach.

Despite the unknowns surrounding H1N1, it is an influenza virus and can be controlled with measures that have been reducing the risk of infection and controlling its spread for centuries.

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