

## **Examiner Column from Dr. Rosana Salvaterra, Medical Officer of Health Peterborough Public Health**

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### **The flu doesn't care if you've been naughty or nice**

It's official. Flu season has begun in Canada, with Influenza A H3N2 in the lead as the strain causing the most illnesses. H3N2 tends to be a more severe influenza, and fortunately has been included in the flu vaccine this year. So if you haven't been immunized yet, take this newspaper with you and go directly to the closest pharmacy or your doctor's office to avail yourself of a publicly funded flu shot. Immunization against influenza is still the best protection we have to offer.

Each year in Canada, the seasonal influenza outbreak sends about 12 thousand people to hospital and kills about 3,500 Canadians. We can't really tell exact numbers as most people who fall ill are not tested. But estimates are that anywhere from 10 to 20 percent of the population will get the flu each year. Those under two years of age, or over 65 years, are at highest risk of hospitalization and death, but it's children aged five to nine years who have the highest rates of infection. And when those little ones visit grandma or hug their newborn baby brother, they pass it on. The virus can live for a few minutes on our hands, or for days on a countertop or table. Hence the importance of frequent handwashing.

This year in Peterborough, we are entering flu season at a time when our regional hospital is already stretched. This means that any flu-related surge might send the hospital into a situation where resources are overwhelmed. To prevent this from happening, local family doctors are preparing to boost the number of ill people they can see on the same day, or in their afterhours clinic. The hope is that in doing this, people who have influenza and who are at high risk of hospitalization can be started on antiviral medication to help prevent them from becoming severely ill. Antivirals like Tamiflu<sup>®</sup> or Relenza<sup>®</sup> can cut the rate of hospitalization in half if started within the first 24 to 48 hours of illness. In the 2009-10 pandemic, the use of Tamiflu<sup>®</sup> reduced deaths by 19% in patients with laboratory confirmed H1N1 Influenza A.

Think you have the flu and you are not at high risk for complications? The best thing you can do is to stay home and not go to work or to that holiday party so that you stop the spread of the virus. Influenza is contagious the day before symptoms start and is most communicable in the first three to five days of the illness. Children can spread it even longer, for seven to ten days.

As people prepare to celebrate the holidays, health care partners in Peterborough are preparing for the start of our annual influenza outbreak. Our hospital, primary care providers and public health are working together so that we can make sure people who become ill know whether it is safe to stay home and ride it out, or seek medical attention quickly in order to access an antiviral. Public health has asked



seniors living in retirement homes to make sure their visitors have been immunized. We continue to remind all health care workers, including those working in long term care homes, that they have a duty to protect their patients by getting a flu shot every year. That message applies to everyone who has a loved one who is at risk, young or old, as well as those who are pregnant. It takes two weeks after your shot for your immune system to produce enough antibodies to protect you from influenza – so there's no time to waste. Unlike Santa, the flu doesn't care if you've been naughty or nice. Please join me and get your flu shot now.

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For more information about Dr. Salvaterra, her bio is available on this webpage:

<http://www.peterboroughpublichealth.ca/about-us/about-us-2/our-medical-officer-of-health/>