

September 25, 2009

Dear Colleagues:

As you are aware, we are currently in the midst of immunization planning for the 2009/10 flu season. In fact, there was an all-day meeting yesterday with provincial and district health authority public health staff to address the opportunities and challenges surrounding this year's immunization program.

A core component of the program is, of course, how we will administer both the seasonal and the H1N1 influenza vaccines. We understand your need for detailed information on these programs, but the information necessary to make decisions has been continually evolving. It has been critical to take as much time as possible to ensure our decision is based on the best evidence available and informed by discussions at the federal/provincial/territorial level.

Our decision takes many factors into account. Most years, we don't start to see cases of seasonal flu until January. Based on the evidence to date, there is a strong possibility we will see the second wave of H1N1 sooner. Very preliminary evidence is telling us that there may be a chance that getting a seasonal flu shot increases the chance of getting H1N1. Again, while this information is preliminary and is being further investigated by the World Health Organization and the Public Health Agency of Canada, it needs to be taken seriously.

Seniors are at low risk of getting H1N1 but at greatest risk of becoming seriously ill with seasonal flu. They need the most protection against seasonal flu. The rest of the population, particularly our children and youth, are at greater risk from H1N1, especially during the next three to four months.

In summary, our decision on the immunization plan for the 2009/10 flu season is based on several factors, including:

- Canadian studies that have suggested that prior seasonal influenza vaccination may increase the risk of getting H1N1;
- the possibility of an early fall second wave of H1N1 flu;
- the timing of H1N1 vaccine availability; and,
- the strains of influenza that are currently circulating.

Therefore, I need to advise you that our decision for immunization for this year's flu season is as follows:

- The first phase of our seasonal influenza immunization program will be for people aged 65 and over and residents in long-term care. Seasonal flu vaccine will be available from your local Public Health Services office starting October 5th.
- The H1N1 immunization program will be for all Nova Scotians who want and need the vaccine. At present, we anticipate that this program will begin in early November. Details on how the H1N1 vaccine will be delivered are still being finalized.
- It is expected that the second phase of our seasonal influenza immunization program, which will be for all of the usual target groups, will begin following the H1N1 vaccination program. However, final decisions on this step will be made as the epidemiology of both seasonal and H1N1 influenza evolves.

Given the logistical complexity involved with the H1N1 pandemic, its continual evolution and our knowledge of it, this decision is subject to change. We commit to keeping you informed in a timely manner.

Up-to-date information on all aspects of H1N1 is available at www.gov.ns.ca/hpp/h1n1.

Sincerely,



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Chief Public Health Officer