

**APPROVED- April 23, 2009, 2 p.m.**

**Questions and Answers – Mexican Severe Respiratory Illnesses**

**Background**

The Public Health Agency of Canada has been alerted to clusters of severe respiratory illnesses in some cities in Mexico. While Mexico has been able to confirm that some of this illness was caused by influenza A and B, they have requested help from PHAC's National Microbiology Laboratory to conduct further laboratory testing. PHAC alerted provinces and territories of this situation on Monday, April 20, 2009.

On Wednesday, April 22, Mexican authorities held a news release to share more information about the situation, including number of deaths (20 since March 18, 2009), with a total of 137 cases of severe respiratory illness reported overall.

**Q1. What region of Mexico does the infection come from?**

We have been made aware of clusters of severe respiratory illness, with deaths in Mexico City, San Luis Potosi, Oaxaca and Baja California Norte. Seasonal influenza is also still circulating in Mexico. Some cases appear to be due to influenza, the cause(s) of the others are unknown.

**Q2. How many cases are there in Mexico?**

We have been made aware of clusters of severe respiratory illness, with deaths, in Mexico City (120 cases, 13 deaths), San Luis Potosi (14 cases, 4 deaths), Oaxaca (1 death) and Baja California Norte (2 deaths).

**Q3. How many suspected cases in of severe respiratory illness are there in Canada?**

We are aware of one report of a person who returned from Mexico on March 22 who had a severe respiratory infection and has recovered. This may be unrelated to the current situation in Mexico but is under investigation.

**Q4. How do people get it?**

Influenza and other (severe) respiratory infections are transmitted from person to person via the respiratory route. Coughs and sneezes release the germs into the air where they can be breathed in by others. Germs can also rest on hard surfaces like counters and doorknobs, where they can be picked up on hands and transmitted to the respiratory system when someone touches their mouth and/or nose.

**Q5. Do we have a vaccine for this?**

We do not know the cause of some of these illnesses. However, as Mexico is experiencing a late influenza season, we are considering how any travellers to

Mexico who have not received this season's flu vaccine, could access any remaining supply.

**Q6. Does PHAC have any idea of how many Canadians have traveled to Mexico? Will PHAC be issuing a travel advisory?**

Mexico continues to see a peak in cases of seasonal influenza. At this point, there is no evidence to suggest that travellers to Mexico would be at any heightened risk for respiratory illness.

Travellers should follow the same precautionary measures that PHAC recommends to protect against seasonal influenza – receiving a seasonal flu shot, practising frequent handwashing, covering coughs and sneezes, and staying home when ill. At this time, we do not have a record of how many Canadians have travelled to Mexico; however, this information is being collected presently.

PHAC is currently looking into providing more travel advice to Canadians travelling to and returning from Mexico. We will provide this advice as soon as possible and update it as more information becomes available about the situation in Mexico.

**Q7. What do I do if I've been to Mexico and I have symptoms of a respiratory illness?**

If you have recently been to Mexico and are exhibiting symptoms of a respiratory illness, you should get in contact with your health care professional to discuss your symptoms. Make sure to tell your health care professional about your travel history.

**Q8. Are the cases of severe respiratory illness in Mexico linked to the cases of human swine influenza in California?**

There is no evidence to suggest that there is any link between the cases of human swine influenza reported in California and the cases of severe respiratory illness in Mexico at this point. The laboratory testing, which is underway, will help to confirm whether or not there is any relation between the two.

**Q9. Is this the next influenza pandemic?**

Pandemic influenza is caused by a new influenza virus which causes serious illness and is readily transmitted between people. Intensive investigations are underway to determine the cause of these illnesses and deaths.

**Q10. Is PHAC's National Microbiology Laboratory providing assistance to Mexico?**

Yes. PHAC was contacted by Mexican health authorities late Friday, April 17, with a request for the National Microbiology Laboratory to provide diagnostic lab testing assistance.

PHAC is working collaboratively with the Mexican health authorities to find out what might be causing the severe respiratory illnesses. The National Microbiology Laboratory has received clinical samples from Mexico, and will be testing them for a range of pathogens. The results of the laboratory testing will be communicated back to Mexican officials as soon as possible.

**Q11. Will PHAC release these results to the public?**

No. PHAC will release the laboratory results to Mexico only. In the event that the laboratory results indicate that these clusters represent a risk to global public health, Mexico will be responsible to communicate these results to international partners. It should be noted that the results of these laboratory tests cannot be reviewed in isolation; Mexico must review them in the context of other factors such as the epidemiology and clinical/patient information.

**Q12. What information has PHAC shared with health officials in provinces and territories? What about laboratories, and quarantine officers?**

PHAC continues to be in contact with provincial and territorial health partners, laboratories and quarantine officers. PHAC has provided updated information on the cases, and asked public health officials to do the following

- Increase vigilance screening and report unusual clusters or severe respiratory illnesses particularly in travellers returning from Mexico;
- Send any unidentifiable influenza viruses, and samples from patients with severe respiratory illness of unknown cause to NML for testing.

**Q13. Why is the NML providing assistance to Mexico?**

Canada and Mexico have a good working relationship, and work together on the Laboratory Network of the Global Health Security Action Group. Mexico asked PHAC to provide assistance in diagnostic testing of samples of the severe respiratory illnesses. It is not unusual for laboratories to request this kind of assistance at the international level.