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Influenza @work

An employer's guide to starting a flu clinic*



*There may be other considerations specific to the needs of your corporation and/or flu clinic.

Influenza Explained



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Influenza (flu) is an ongoing health challenge, with millions of Canadians affected by it every year. This common and highly contagious respiratory illness attacks the nose, throat and lungs and is a particular health threat to elderly people, children and individuals who have chronic health problems. It is estimated that between 2,000 and 8,000 Canadians die from influenza—or complications from influenza, such as pneumonia—each year.¹ “People still believe that influenza is a mild illness because they don’t differentiate between mild winter viruses and the much more serious influenza disease,” explains Dr. Paul Van Buynder, chief medical health officer at Fraser Health in British Columbia.

The signs and symptoms of flu generally appear quite quickly and can include fatigue (often extreme), sneezing, runny nose, watery eyes, chills, muscle aches, headache, cough, fever, loss of appetite and sore throat.² Flu symptoms generally last five to six days. The illness may result in three to four days of bed disability and another three days of being absent from work and from school.³ According to the Canadian Healthcare Influenza Immunization Network, about 1.5 million workdays are lost in Canada annually because of the flu, resulting in healthcare costs and lost productivity equalling \$1 billion.⁴

An infected person can be contagious for seven days after symptoms appear,⁵ meaning flu can be easily and quickly spread in the workplace. In a survey of more than 3,700 U.S. workers about work and illness, most people (72%) reported that they went to work even when sick. Fifty-five percent said they feel guilty if they call in sick, while 53% reported that they became sick because of a co-worker who came to work sick.⁶

Prevention

Influenza can be prevented by using common-sense measures such as frequent hand washing, using alcohol-based hand sanitizers and

keeping hands away from the face. Coughing into a sleeve or arm rather than hands helps minimize contact infection, and regular cleaning and disinfection of common surface areas like doorknobs, keyboards, telephones and countertops is recommended.

The best way to prevent influenza, however, is immunization with the flu vaccine. Unfortunately, according to the Public Health Agency of Canada, rates of immunization are still less than ideal.⁷ Common reasons cited for not being vaccinated include missed opportunities to be vaccinated while visiting a physician’s office and fear of injections.⁸ Low immunization rates may also lie in misconceptions employers and employees have about influenza and the safety and effectiveness of the flu vaccine (for more information, see *Dispelling Myths*).

Dispelling Myths

Many misconceptions continue to surround influenza, and it’s important to recognize and address them to encourage better employee participation in flu clinics. Some of the most common are described here.

Myth: Flu is not a serious illness.

Truth: Influenza is a serious, contagious disease that leads to visits to the physician, hospitalization and 2,000 to 8,000 deaths in Canada each year.¹ As well, there are about 1.5 million workdays lost annually in Canada because of the flu, resulting in \$1 billion in healthcare and lost productivity costs.⁴

Myth: The flu shot causes the flu.

Truth: The flu shot only contains some proteins from the virus, and not the actual live virus that can cause disease.^{9,10}

Myth: Washing hands is the best protection against catching the flu.

Truth: While hand washing is one way to prevent illness, getting a flu shot provides the best defence against contracting the flu.

Myth: The flu vaccine only protects against one strain of flu.

Truth: The circulating flu viruses can change from year to year. The flu vaccine is reformulated annually to protect against the three strains of flu that are predicted to be circulating in the coming year.¹¹ Being vaccinated every year is important.¹²

Is It Safe?¹³

Flu vaccination is considered very safe, but as with any medication, side effects may occur. The most commonly reported side effect is soreness or tenderness at the injection site, which may last for a couple of days. Fever, fatigue and muscle aches may develop within 6 to 12 hours following the injection.

Oculo-respiratory syndrome may develop, in which red eyes, cough, chest tightness, breathing difficulties or sore throat may occur. Symptoms are generally mild and disappear within 48 hours.

A rare but possible severe allergic reaction is Guillain-Barré syndrome (GBS), an autoimmune disease which attacks the nervous system, causing weakness and abnormal sensations.

All individuals should consult with their physicians to determine whether the flu vaccination is suitable for them. Children under six months of age, or anyone who has an allergy to eggs or has demonstrated a previous allergy to the vaccine should not be vaccinated.

Why Hold a Workplace Flu Clinic?

Vaccination is an important line of defence against flu, and on-site flu clinics benefit employers and employees alike. The widespread and debilitating nature of the flu means that yearly outbreaks of flu lead to substantial workplace absenteeism; the associated cost of lost productivity is a huge component of the disease's substantial financial burden on society.¹⁴

Annual influenza vaccinations have traditionally been targeted to elderly people and other high-risk individuals, and have been shown to be cost-effective.³ A U.S. cost-benefit analysis—the results of which were published

in the *Archives of Internal Medicine* in 2001—showed that the value of indirect costs or lost productivity that was avoided reflected approximately 78% of all costs prevented due to vaccination.³

Studies also show that the spread of influenza is linked to workplace contact, and that vaccinating employees against seasonal flu results in less flu-related absenteeism and, in turn, lost productivity.^{15,16} In a 1994 study of 841 healthy, working adults conducted in Minnesota, immunization decreased the frequency of upper respiratory illness by 25%, reduced absences from work due to this illness by 43% and absences due to all illnesses by 36%.¹⁷ Visits to physicians due to upper respiratory illness were reduced by 44%.¹⁷ “From a preventive side, there’s really no doubt that flu immunization is an effective means of keeping people healthy—and as employers we’re going to be losing because of time off work and lost productivity if we don’t make it easy for people to be immunized,” says Melanie Goroniuk, manager, Health Promotion & Worklife Services at the University of Alberta. “One of the things we focus on is making the healthy choice the easy choice, so if people decide they want a flu shot, we make it easy for them to do so.”

Lori Casselman, assistant vice-president, Health & Productivity Solutions at Sun Life Financial, points out another key reason for employers to consider setting up workplace flu clinics: timing. “People often have the best intentions of being vaccinated, but it’s a time issue and a convenience issue, so bringing the clinic on-site just makes it more convenient and accessible for employees. Typically, this increases the number of employees who get vaccinated, so it’s a win-win situation from both an employer and employee perspective.”

Ensuring Senior Management Buy-in

Research shows that having support from senior management is critical to ensuring high rates of participation in an on-site wellness program of any kind. “Start from the top and work your way down,” suggests Susan Hyatt, an occupational health nurse at Fraser Health in British Columbia.

So, how do companies get agreement from senior management about implementing an on-site influenza clinic? Are they approached on a cost-efficiency basis or on an emotional basis? A combination of both, says Leanne MacFarlane, senior director, business development at MHCSI (Managed Health Care Services Inc.).

Who Should be Vaccinated?

The National Advisory Committee on Immunization recommends that everyone, except for children under six months of age or anyone who has had a serious allergic reaction to eggs and/or a negative reaction to a previous vaccine, should be vaccinated.^{13,18} In particular, the following priority groups should receive the vaccine:

- People age 65 or older
- People with serious health problems, e.g., heart, kidney, lung disease
- People with diabetes, cancer or blood disorders
- People with a weakened immune system
- Children age six months to 18 years on long-term ASA treatment
- Healthy children six to 23 months of age
- Healthy pregnant women
- Aboriginal peoples
- Residents, employees and volunteers at nursing homes, hospitals, chronic care institutions or retirement facilities
- Essential community service workers
- People living with an individual at high risk for influenza-related complications

“Certainly, the usual thing is that you talk about the business advantages in terms of absenteeism, lost days of work, lower productivity and then, therefore, the savings potential for providing vaccinations. But you may also appeal to them as individuals rather than just as employers. We know that by having the flu shot, an individual is helping to protect other people in the community, their families and their co-workers.”

Tie vaccination into company wellness culture

Many companies now have a culture that includes wellness in respect to health, illness prevention and risk management, so the notion of a flu clinic is not a foreign idea. “We talk a lot about health and wellness at our company, so I think now a vaccination program is just something that people expect will happen,” says Mark Roach, director, Calgary Group Disability Operations at Manulife Financial. Employers, having recognized the ROI in employee wellness, traditionally focus on chronic areas like heart disease and diabetes. There is now a growing understanding of the impact of flu on the workplace, making it another important element of any company wellness program.

Explain cost-effectiveness

An article published in 1998 in the *Journal of the Ontario Occupational Health Nurses Association* made the case for influenza immunization programs not only helping to control costs, but also improving quality of life for employees, their co-workers and family members. “Short-term absenteeism may be reduced, translating into a cost-containment measure for the employer. Increased productivity during the flu season is a result of healthier employees who are not absent from work due to influenza or related diseases.”¹⁹



Cost, too, may not be as much of an issue as it once was. “The expense of having a clinic has gone down significantly now that the cost of the vaccine is covered by many provinces (for more information, see Resources), and this makes it an easier sell. And I think there’s just more recognition of the benefits; there’s greater recognition of wellness programs in general. It’s a more receptive audience these days,” says Casselman.

Create a comprehensive plan

“Key strategies to getting agreement from management include having good information available about the importance of influenza vaccination, involving HR and occupational health at an early stage, and ensuring that there are no barriers to worker access,” explains Van Buynder. During brief face-to-face presentations with key personnel, provide the following:

- A description of influenza and the vaccine
- The rationale for immunizing healthy adults
- The benefits of a company-supported program
- The costs involved, including how the clinic will take crucial production cycles and shift work into consideration
- Next steps

“I think the key [to a flu clinic program’s success] is education and getting buy-in. If this is another HR initiative to which they want people to commit, it won’t have the same impact as if my boss says it’s important,” says Karen Seward, executive vice-president, marketing and business development at Morneau Shepell.

Setting up a Flu Clinic

After receiving senior management approval, there are key considerations employers need to address when implementing an on-site flu clinic.

Draft a flu clinic policy

Having a policy in place is important since it will help you direct the process and ensure that everyone is fully aware of how the clinic planning and implementation will unfold. The policy can cover such things as whether you intend to run the clinic yourself or engage the services of an outside provider (and at what approximate cost). You may also wish to propose that the flu clinic be made available to employees’ family members as well. Draft a policy and get feedback from all concerned stakeholders before finalizing it and presenting it to management.

Choose a program leader

A workplace flu clinic requires a point-person to spearhead the initiative. “If your company has an occupational healthcare worker on staff, this person would be the ideal choice. Communications staff, if you have them, can help with the messaging,” explains Van Buynder. Wynet Wong, corporate wellness co-ordinator at British Columbia’s TransLink agrees, adding that it is crucial, particularly in companies with multiple sites, to have an individual who can co-ordinate schedules for all locations. If there is no occupational health staff on site, identify a person who has good organizational skills and who will solidly embrace the idea of a workplace flu clinic.

Build a timeline

Flu season runs from October to May, although typically, many employers offer flu clinics in November. “To ensure the program launch is met, the team leader should create a work-back that includes a comprehensive month-by-month timeline of duties,” says Sylvana Leclerc, wellness specialist at Canadian Pacific in Calgary (see Planning at a Glance). Scheduling your clinic in conjunction with a workplace health fair at which biometric screening is offered may also work well. Employees can take advantage of the opportunity to be screened for cholesterol levels, blood glucose levels, blood pressure, etc., while also having a flu vaccination—one-stop shopping, so to speak.

Gauge employee support

To determine interest in an on-site flu clinic, employers need to canvass their employees (see Promote the flu clinic). This is also an ideal opportunity to “provide preliminary information to all employees about the severity of influenza illness, the safety and effectiveness of the influenza vaccine and the importance of protection for workers and their vulnerable family members,” says Van Buynder.

Assess internal resources

Employers with an on-site corporate medical team may already have the capacity to implement a flu vaccine program. Other employers may require help with planning, setting up and/or administering the vaccine. If medical staff, e.g., nurses, are hired from outside, this requires advance planning. Administrative staff who can help book appointments or handle any other necessary paperwork need to be identified. A suitable area in the workplace (cafeteria, boardroom) must be made available and reserved. Refrigeration, for vaccine storage, is necessary. For a list of public health agencies by province, see Resources.

Having a good provider is also important, notes Leclerc. “National co-ordination does not work well; we tried it and found it didn't work. We returned to using regional co-ordinators who are familiar with our individual locations, and our specific site needs and geography.” Providers are also a huge help in determining how many vaccine doses to order, which is one of the most difficult things to do at the outset, she acknowledges. This large, Canada-wide company has been offering flu clinics to its employees for more than 10 years, with tremendous success. Another contributor to success, says Leclerc, is having champions at each site the day the vaccinations are being offered.

Planning at a Glance

A step-by-step timeline to setting up an on-site flu clinic to launch at the end of October.

| Time frame | Tasks |
|------------------------|---|
| One year prior | <p>Explore on-site flu clinics with senior management through face-to-face meetings on how workplace vaccination protects employees and makes good economic sense (decreases absenteeism).</p> <p>Achieve buy-in, funding and have management write and sign an influenza vaccine policy.</p> |
| February | <p>Remind management of the agreement and start implementation:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Choose a program leader • Build a timeline • Canvass employees to gauge interest; provide information on the safety and effectiveness of the flu vaccine • Assess internal resources • Book the rooms you will need (determine size, privacy needs, consideration for refrigeration) • Connect with the vaccine source (e.g., Public Health), and request the vaccine or establish a date to order it • If no internal resources exist to host a clinic, contract an outside provider and sign an agreement (this contractor should bring all staff, clinic supplies and vaccine needed for the clinic) |
| April | <p>Decide whether clerical staff for data entry or for other non-nursing tasks is needed. The main organizer keeps track of all information such as how many nurses and clerical staff are needed, dates and times of clinics, room/space bookings, clinic supplies, etc., although employers with several job sites should also appoint someone at each location to communicate with the overall team leader (to ensure room/space bookings are done and tables and chairs are present).</p> |
| July | <p>Create promotional material:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Emails with flu vaccine information and clinic schedule • Information on company intranet • Posters |
| Early September | <p>Launch the promotional material listed above.</p> |
| Late September | <p>Ensure everything is ready to go.</p> |
| Mid-October | <p>Check on the details/status of the clinic. Do you need to expand or decrease the clinic times and number of nurses hired depending on employee sign up?</p> |
| Late October | <p>Clinic launch day.</p> |

*Courtesy of Susan Hyatt, occupational health nurse, Fraser Health, British Columbia

The table shows a comprehensive timeline. For a smaller company, the process can likely be shortened (for example, a summer start for a fall flu clinic), but it cannot be done overnight.

Promote the flu clinic

Create a multi-platform promotional campaign that explains the details around when and where the flu clinic will be held, and how employees can schedule an appointment. For on-site flu clinics to be successful, it is critical that lots of buzz is created around them. Promoting your clinic with a variety of tools—throughout the year, and more aggressively just prior to flu season—is key. Focusing on the specific tools that have worked for you in

promoting other health initiatives is another approach; perhaps your employees respond better to email reminders than they do to posters, for example. Make use of all available communication tools at your disposal—the company’s intranet or website, bulletin boards, fax blasts, email blasts, corporate newsletters—to publicize the clinics. Keep it simple: the most successful clinics are easily accessible and take employee schedules into consideration.

Fast Facts

Is the vaccine universally available?

The flu vaccine is universally available and currently fully funded in every province and territory with the exception of British Columbia, Quebec, New Brunswick, Newfoundland and Labrador,²⁰ although there may be changes to come. Visit the Public Health Agency of Canada’s website (Public Funding for Influenza Vaccination at <http://www.phac-aspc.gc.ca/im/ptimprog-progimpt/flu vacc-eng.php>) for a complete list of vaccine coverage in each province and territory.

How do I publicize the clinic to my employees?

- Posters, particularly in high-traffic areas
- Intranet sites
- Company newsletters
- Email blasts
- Desk drop postcards
- Notices with pay slips
- Wellness representatives

What do I need to consider when planning the physical set-up of the clinic?

- A large, well-lit room, says Ana Lopez, director, human resources, TransLink; “enclosed rooms are preferable, because for many people it’s a privacy issue”
- Tables for check-in, as participants need to sign consent forms; ensure pens are on the tables
- A seating area for those who are waiting their turn, and another for after injections; people must wait 15 minutes before leaving to make sure they’ve had no reaction to the shot
- A couple of garbage pails

Many of our employees work in remote sites or are on the road. How do we ensure they get vaccinated?

Provide employees with a list of community organizations or local pharmacies that are operating clinics, and make arrangements for them to be vaccinated at those sites. Leclerc suggests making use of travel medicine clinics for those employees who are not in fixed locations.

We have multiple sites: how do we handle this?

A co-ordinator is needed at each site, and more than one date may need to be scheduled for the clinics.

Our company is very small. Can we still host a flu clinic?

Talk to a service provider about the number of people required. One idea might be to partner with other small local businesses in the building or in the neighbourhood.

What should I know about timing during the actual day?

Pre-booking appointments makes it easier for everyone. Allow for about six vaccinations per half hour.

Do I need to consider refrigeration?

According to Hyatt, “Maintaining ‘cold chain’ is extremely important. The flu vaccine needs to be stored between 2°C and 8°C. If the employer is hosting its own immunization clinic, it will need to have a temperature-controlled refrigerator.” Temperatures need to be checked at least twice a day. Cold chain has to be maintained from the source of the vaccine when transported to the temperature-controlled fridge at the work site. If you’re using a contract service, then the service provider will bring the vaccine in a cooler. Cooler cold chain has to be maintained.

TransLink purchased a vaccine fridge a few years ago. “It’s temperature regulated,” explains Lopez, “and that means when we get our vaccines in, we can store them there. What’s good about this is that people who have missed attending can call our nurses and book individual appointments, and we know that we have vaccine on hand.”

Keep good records

If it’s the company’s first year hosting a flu clinic, see how many employees get vaccinated (on the work site or elsewhere), and then try to improve on that number year after year. As vaccination rates increase, so too does the cost-effectiveness of the program.

Case Study

Rogers Communications Inc.

Rogers Communications Inc. has run seasonal flu clinics at most of its work sites for many years as part of the company's commitment to providing its 31,000-employee base with a healthy and safe workplace. The minimum attendance rates required are determined in advance, ensuring that the clinics make good economic sense.

Communication

Most employees learn about the flu clinics through email (65%), while others are made aware through the company's internal website (Bwell), by a co-worker or through seeing a poster. A survey of employees conducted on behalf of Rogers by the International Centre for Infectious Diseases indicates that 70% of those who had had a flu shot in the last two years reported receiving it at a Rogers' seasonal flu vaccination clinic. Fifty-three percent of employees said they would not get the flu shot if it was no longer provided by Rogers, which speaks to the convenience and accessibility of workplace clinics.²¹

Rogers wanted to evaluate the use and uptake of its current influenza vaccination program, and to do so, conducted extensive research with its employees, both pre- and post-flu season. Its intent was to determine and evaluate the use and uptake of its current vaccination program.²¹ A simultaneous literature review showed that Rogers' health and wellness program was effective in educating employees about preventing flu, and in encouraging them to take advantage of the flu vaccination program.²¹ Research demonstrated that Rogers has a higher uptake of flu vaccine compared to national statistics, and that Rogers' employees were aware of the benefits of flu vaccination. The program will be assessed again this year, using the same questions, to assess whether there is any change in uptake.

How it's done

"Depending on when we receive the vaccine, we typically hold our flu clinics in November," says Darlene Fitzpatrick, corporate health nurse at Rogers and the leader of the company's flu clinic program. "We have 6,000 employees in our Brampton location and hold a flu clinic over two full days from 8 a.m. to 4 p.m. with two nurses. At some of our smaller sites, I have one nurse available for two hours. On average, a nurse can do up to six vaccinations per half hour."

What employees think

Many Rogers' employees find the workplace flu clinic easy to access, and appreciate that their employer makes their health and wellness a priority. A post-clinic survey conducted with employees elicited 1,885 responses. Here is what some of the employees said:

"I think access to flu shots at the office is important. Many employees do not have a family doctor or convenient transportation to clinics. I think that Rogers providing this service to employees promotes a healthier office environment."

"As someone likely to suffer more and longer from flu symptoms, I appreciate that Rogers is doing this to help me stay healthy and keeping my colleagues healthy as well. It contributes to our well-being, not just as individuals, but also as a group, and I appreciate it."

"Having these clinics at the workplace is very convenient. We

are at work already, so no appointments have to be made with the family doctor."

"For on-line agents it would be good to be able to provide flexibility in appointments, as even if appointments are booked for your break, if you end up on an escalated customer issue, you aren't able to make the appointment."

"I find that our clinics are very late in the season. I would prefer it as soon as possible to reduce the risk of early infection."

Who can do it?

"Anyone can do it," says Fitzpatrick. "It's a matter of being interested [enough] and in planning ahead. An administrative assistant at any small- or medium-size company could simply phone the local public health department and inform them that the company is interested in providing its employees with a flu vaccination clinic. In a particularly small company you'd want to ensure that you have enough people interested in attending the clinic." This is done by providing employees with the facts around the safety and effectiveness of the flu vaccine, surveying them to determine their interest and intention to attend and providing final numbers to the public health department or to a third-party provider of vaccination clinics.

What Worked for Our Company

The experts weigh in

"Getting clinic participants to complete their forms in advance of the clinic date saves time. And offering people a time frame as opposed to actual appointments has worked well for us. If someone has a fixed appointment, let's say at 2:15 p.m., and has to miss it because of being caught up in something, but could have come at 3 p.m., we want that person to know it's not too late. So it makes more sense to suggest a 2 p.m.- 4 p.m. range." *Cathy Lockhart, Nova Scotia Liquor Corporation*

"What we do is use an external provider. A nurse comes in and gets set up with the vaccine and everything that is actually required to administer the flu shot. So for the employer, it's really about co-ordinating to get people lined up to show up at a certain time and place. It's a lot of upfront work—but once it's underway, I find that it basically runs itself." *Mark Roach, Manulife Financial*

"We make sure that the internal staff co-ordinating the clinics communicates to the management team about why this is important for the business, and from there, obviously, communicate to the employees about why we want them to participate." *Leanne MacFarlane, MHCSI*

"Be prepared for the unexpected. In the days just prior to your clinic dates, confirm again with everyone. Make sure that outside providers who are coming in to administer the vaccine have the correct address, easy access to the site, and a telephone number to reach you at in case of delays." *Sylvana Leclerc, Canadian Pacific*

"We have an external wellness website, and the sign-up page for flu clinics is right there. You just click there, look for your city and pick your time." *Patricia Paone, Canadian Blood Services*

"Things like online registration, making sure clinics are held at times when employees can attend—these are important. Pre-booking appointments helps us plan and staff accordingly and gives the employees a sense of accountability because they've booked a time." *Lori Casseleman, Sun Life Financial*

Resources

ALBERTA

www.health.alberta.ca/health-info/influenza.html
www.albertahealthservices.ca/influenza.asp

BRITISH COLUMBIA

www.healthlinkbc.ca/kb/content/major/hw122012.html#hw122014
www.health.gov.bc.ca/socsec/provmap.html

MANITOBA

www.gov.mb.ca/health/flu/index.html
www.gov.mb.ca/health/rha/contact.html

NEW BRUNSWICK

<http://www2.gnb.ca/content/gnb/en/corporate/promo/flu.html>
http://www2.gnb.ca/content/gnb/en/departments/ocmoh/healthy_people/content/public_health_clinics.html

NEWFOUNDLAND AND LABRADOR

www.health.gov.nl.ca/health/publichealth/cdc/Protect_against_influenza.pdf
www.health.gov.nl.ca/health/findhealthservices/in_your_community.html

NORTHWEST TERRITORIES

www.hlthss.gov.nt.ca/english/services/flu/default.htm
www.hlthss.gov.nt.ca/english/services/help_lines/help_directory_database/view_by_subject.asp?Subject=Health%20and%20Social%20Services%20Authorities

NOVA SCOTIA

www.gov.ns.ca/hpp/cdpc/influenza.asp
www.gov.ns.ca/DHW/about/phs-offices.asp

NUNAVUT

www.flunu.ca/i18n/english/index.htm
www.flunu.ca/PDFs/Community_Contact_List.pdf

ONTARIO

www.health.gov.on.ca/en/public/programs/publichealth/flu/
www.health.gov.on.ca/english/public/contact/phu/phuloc_mn.html

PRINCE EDWARD ISLAND

<http://www.gov.pe.ca/flu>

QUEBEC

www.msss.gouv.qc.ca/sujets/prob_sante/influenza/index.php?influenza_cest_quoi_en
www.msss.gouv.qc.ca/sujets/prob_sante/influenza/index.php?id=101,216,0,0,1,0

SASKATCHEWAN

www.health.gov.sk.ca/influenza
www.health.gov.sk.ca/health-regions-map

YUKON

www.hss.gov.yk.ca/flu.php

HEALTH CANADA

www.hc-sc.gc.ca/hl-vs/iyh-vsv/diseases-maladies/flu-grippe-eng.php

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