

Infection control in pandemics

Leanne Rich, RN, GradDipMCH
The Royal Australian College of General Practitioners, South Melbourne, Victoria

Infection control will be the primary focus of preventing the spread of the influenza virus in a pandemic situation.

How is influenza spread?

Influenza can be spread by droplets, ie. an infected person's cough or sneeze can be propelled to the mucosal surfaces of another person, and onto surfaces where the virus is transmitted to an uninfected person by contact with the contaminated surface. Influenza may also be spread by airborne particles inhaled by an uninfected person.

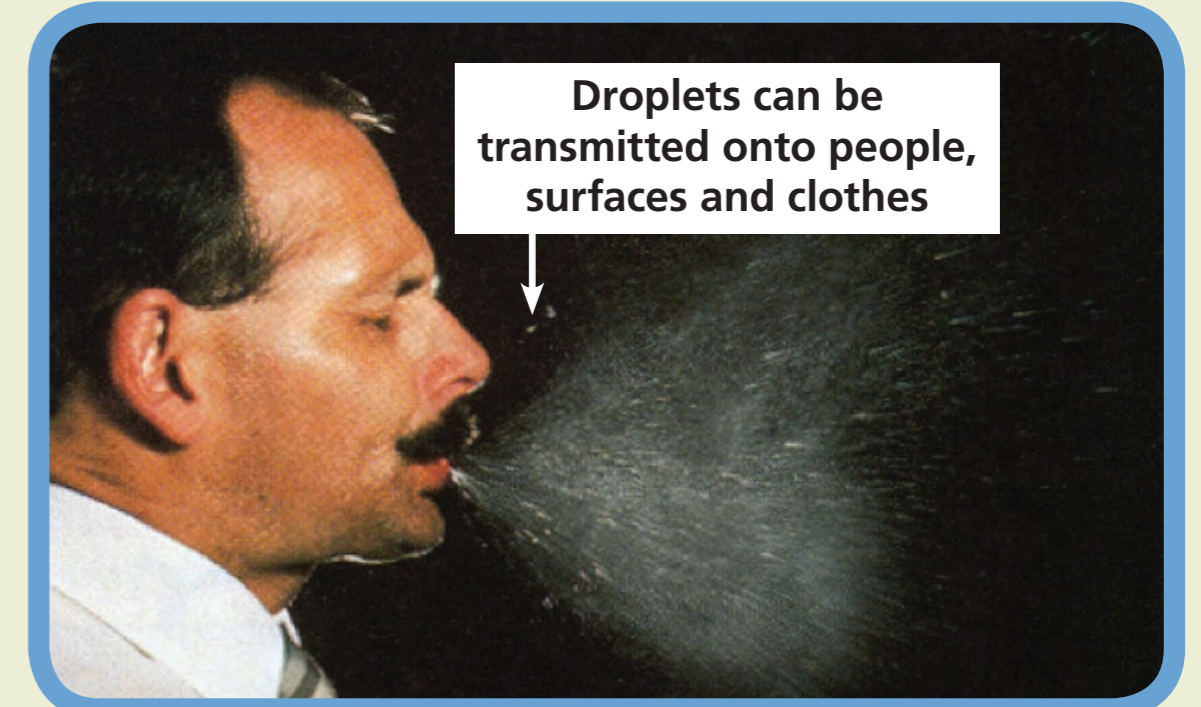


Image courtesy of Centers for Disease Control and Prevention

Correct use of personal protective equipment (PPE)

The correct use of PPE is essential in protecting the health of staff and limiting the spread of influenza.

Recommended order of application of PPE



Clean your hands



Put on your P2 mask



Put on your goggles



Put on your gown



Put on your gloves



Treat your patient

Recommended order of removal of PPE



Remove your gloves



Clean your hands



Take off your gown



Clean your hands



Take off your goggles



Clean your hands



Take off your mask



Clean your hands

Cleaning the practice

Some practices have decided to strip down one room to be used for consulting influenza patients if a pandemic situation occurs. This reduces the possibility of contamination and makes cleaning easier.

Droplets can be transmitted onto surfaces and the influenza virus can survive for several hours, however, the virus cannot survive on clean, dry surfaces.

Surfaces need to be cleaned with detergent and water, and dried between patient consultations. You can use the same detergent used for instrument and general cleaning.

In a pandemic situation, the frequency of cleaning will need to be reviewed. Surfaces contacted by patients with pandemic influenza will need to be cleaned between patient consultations, eg. stethoscope, treatment couch, desk.

Refer to page 40 of the RACGP *Infection control standards* (4th edn) for examples of cleaning schedules.

Waste management

Clinical waste is defined as having the potential to cause sharps injury, infection or public offence.¹ Clinical waste will increase in volume with the use of PPE by patients and staff.

Ensure you have a plan for the storage and disposal for increased clinical waste generated during a pandemic.

Public health measures – patient education

To protect themselves and others, patients need to understand the principles of effective respiratory etiquette, social distancing and hand hygiene.

1. Respiratory etiquette

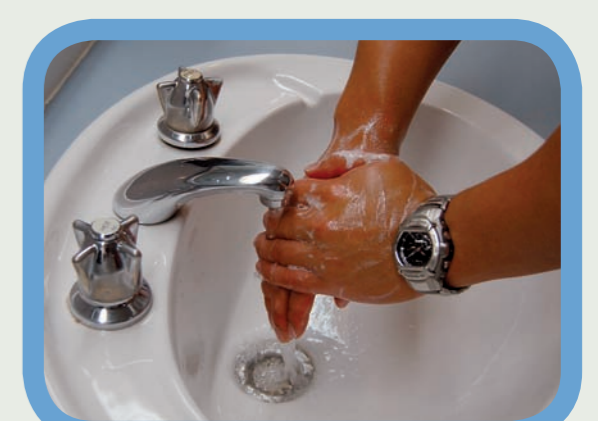
- Cover coughs and sneezes – use tissues, or cough or sneeze into your upper sleeve
- Dispose of used tissues into a waste container
- Wash hands after coughing or sneezing



2. Social distancing

Social distancing means keeping out of reach of cough and sneeze droplets which can be transmitted from about 1 metre away.

- Keep infected patients at least one metre from other patients in the waiting room.
- Infected patients can be segregated by:
 - waiting in a different area of the practice
 - waiting in their car until called
 - asking all patients to wear a mask while they are in the clinic.



1. The Royal Australian College of General Practitioners. *Infection control standards for office based practices*. 4th edn. Melbourne: The RACGP, 2006, p. 46