



FUNDAMENTALS OF COMMUNICATION DURING CRISES AND EMERGENCIES



PREPAREDNESS



RESPONSE

This tool will help you to:

- Understand the fundamentals of communication during crises and emergencies

Who will implement this tool:

- The mayor or a member of the municipal leadership team or your emergency response team
- A communications coordinator, public information officer, social communicator, or community educator

A Message from the World Health Organization (WHO) about the Current Influenza Pandemic

“Effective communication is paramount. Real-time exchange of information has been a key feature of the response so far. The short time that elapsed between first reports of the outbreak, diagnosis, and international action illustrates this. Communication with the general public is equally important, balancing the need to make people aware of risk without causing panic, and, on the other hand, avoiding complacency. This is a particular concern given the uncertainty inherent in how the new influenza (H1N1) virus will evolve. Evaluating the effectiveness of communications (levels of public awareness, degree of concern) is a key element of the strategy.”

– WHO. *Summary Report of a High-Level Consultation: New Influenza (H1N1)*
Geneva, May 18, 2009

BASIC ELEMENTS OF COMMUNICATION

Communications should not be viewed as an activity that is planned, delivered, and then checked off as done. Communication is a process of reaching mutual understanding, during which participants (communicator and audience) exchange, create, and share thoughts, opinions, and information. Being able to communicate effectively is a necessary and vital part of the job of every municipal leader. Well-planned and well-executed communications, fully integrated into every stage of a crisis and emergency response, can help reduce deaths and suffering.

Effective communication requires an understanding of the audience, the goal, the message, and the most effective way to achieve the desired outcome. It also requires acceptance and an understanding of the role of the communicator by the participants.

Effective communication is a two-way activity. Listen to your audience and acknowledge their concerns.

In this section of the Toolkit, you will find information on what makes a good communicator and on how to identify and reach out to a specific audience. The tool will help you to create communication goals and decide which are the most important messages to deliver to specific audiences. Examples and exercises are provided to help you plan which messages you want to repeat and how to reinforce messages with supporting facts and information. You will also find guidance on how to focus on the most important or urgent messages and plan which communication tools, methods, or news media outlets to use.



THE COMMUNICATOR

Communication is a difficult undertaking even when there is not a crisis. Being a good communicator is hard work and takes preparation, focus, and listening skills. Great communicators try to see the audience's point of view.

Trust and credibility are also key principles of effective communication. To build trust you should listen and talk with your constituents and key stakeholders frequently.

Remember to be caring (sympathetic) and understanding (empathetic), as well as honest and open. When you show your commitment and dedication and demonstrate competence and expertise, you will be perceived as a credible source.

Good communicators can be great spokespersons, especially during a time of crisis. (See Tool 14, *News Media Communications*, for specific guidance on the role played by effective spokespersons during emergencies.)

TARGET AUDIENCES MAY INCLUDE:

- Employers
- Essential service workers
- Groups of executives or business leaders
- School teachers and parents
- Healthcare providers
- Government workers
- Farmers
- Store owners
- Workers

WHEN COMMUNICATING WITH YOUR PUBLIC DURING A CRISIS, ALWAYS AIM TO BE:

- Accurate
- Credible
- Willing and able to correct misinformation and dispel rumors
- Consistent
- Relevant
- Frequent
- Prepared to respond
- Timely (*Timely* can mean at regularly scheduled intervals, or in relation to the stage of the crisis: pre-crisis, at the beginning of the crisis, during the crisis, recovering from the crisis, and post-crisis. For clarification about the stages of a crisis and ideas for a communications response, see the *Communication Tasks* section at the end of this Tool.)

THE AUDIENCE

Understanding the informational needs of your community will help you plan and execute an effective communication response. Professional communicators try to identify or target audiences before they begin. A target audience is a distinct group of people you want or need to reach. Once you identify who your audiences are you will need to determine how you can reach them. For example, how do you reach people who do not have access to the mass media, cell phones, and the Internet? If you visit the neighborhoods they live in you might notice places you can post flyers or billboards. And you might meet some of the community leaders and shopkeepers who will later help you spread the message. Look for appropriate ways to deliver information to each audience within your community.

Understanding the audience will also help you shape clear, strategic messages that can be conveyed effectively. You should understand what your audience cares about before you begin to shape your communication messages. A worksheet for identifying key characteristics and facts about various target audiences is included at the end of this tool (See Handout 1).

As a mayor or municipal team member you have a unique insight into your local audiences. You understand that if people feel they are not being heard, they will not listen. So it is important not to make assumptions about what people know, think, or want done about risks that threaten their health and safety. Take the time to find out what the community is thinking. You can use techniques such as interviews, facilitated discussion groups, advisory groups, toll-free call-in numbers, and surveys. Let the parties that have a stake in the issue be heard. Collaborate with volunteers, community groups, and religious leaders. Even your community's youth are an important audience so make sure to listen to their leaders. These groups can offer a greater understanding of how their members may react in certain crises and emergencies. Having contacts with them will be helpful later if you need to leverage their communication networks.

Finally, be aware of the broader social, cultural, economic, or political considerations that may influence communication with your audience. Identify with your audience and try to put yourself in their place.

THE GOAL

During crises and emergencies, people will be principally concerned about their health and physical safety, their access to food and essential services, and their ability

to go to work and have enough money. The public's concerns should always be addressed when you develop your **communications goals** and **key messages**. During a crisis you may have several goals, such as making sure that the community has enough food, water, and medical care. You will also have communication goals. One communications goal during a crisis might be to prevent public panic when there is high mortality. Within the communication goal you may create several key or important messages, such as repeating that people who are sick should stay at home and not go to work or school.

As a municipal leader facing a crisis, your most important communications goals will be to do the following:

- **Share important information.** Inform people of the problem and the specific dangers that your community is facing.
- **Provide reassurance and say what has been done.** Provide concrete facts and reassure the public that authorities are doing everything possible to collect reliable information and share it as soon as it becomes available. Make sure you coordinate local communication with the national and regional authorities to ensure your information is accurate and you are not providing misleading, confusing, or outdated messages.
- **Tell people what they can do.** Provide guidance on actions residents should take to respond to specific challenges.
- **Answer questions.** Address your community's concerns with concrete answers and, if applicable, specific actions they can take.
- **Be empathetic.** Show that you care about the situation and understand what is going on. Empathy is the ability to identify with and understand somebody else's feelings or difficulties. People want to hear how you feel before they hear what you know. Acknowledge and respond to (in words, gestures, and actions) the emotions people express—such as anxiety, fear, anger, and helplessness.
- **Show sympathy when appropriate.** Sympathy is the feeling or expression of pity or sorrow for the pain or distress of somebody else. You can show sympathy for those who are ill or for the families of those that have died.
- **Be prepared ahead of time.** Knowing in advance how you will focus your communications efforts will help you stay on track with your most critical goals. Knowing your audience—details about who they are, what they care about most, and why—and having clear communications goals, will help you shape effective key messages.

(For more information on specific topics you may want to be prepared to discuss, see Tool 4, *Non-Pharmaceutical Interventions [NPIs]: Actions to Limit the Spread of the Pandemic in Your Municipality*; Tool 7, *Food Security in a Pandemic*; and Tool 10, *Household Food Security Preparedness*.)

KEY MESSAGES

Communicating clear and consistent messages that address your audience's concerns is very important to effective communications. During crises and emergencies that demand a rapid response to unexpected and uncertain situations, this can be easier said than done. But it is critical—many times what makes people panic isn't the bad news, but the conflicting messages from those in authority.

SAMPLE COMMUNICATIONS GOALS FOR CRISES AND EMERGENCIES RECOMMENDED BY THE WORLD HEALTH ORGANIZATION

- Maintain, increase, or restore trust.
- Inform and educate governmental authorities, municipal officials, the public, and the media regarding:
 - details of the outbreak
 - outbreak prevention measures (including personal protection measures)
 - the surveillance plan for your municipality or agency
 - the response plan for your municipality or agency
 - disease control methods.
- Increase awareness of the disease and its transmission, prevention, and diagnosis among healthcare providers, including general and hospital practitioners.
- Increase awareness among healthcare providers of the use of control measures.
- Communicate disease control information and recommendations to governmental authorities, municipal officials, the public, and the media in a timely and efficient manner.
- Collaborate and cooperate with key partners and nongovernmental organizations to review and disseminate communications materials.



AN EXAMPLE OF A KEY MESSAGE TAILORED TO A SPECIFIC COMMUNICATIONS GOAL MIGHT BE:

Communications Goal: Let citizens know how they should respond during the influenza pandemic.

Key Message: “You can help reduce the spread of influenza to others by taking these precautions: Wash your hands frequently. Cover your sneeze and cough. If you are ill, wear a mask in the presence of others. Avoid public gatherings.”

Your first step toward ensuring that you are not providing conflicting messages is to *make sure all communication goes through your designated communications coordinator.* (For more information on the designation and role of a communications coordinator, see Tool 13, *Communications Plan Implementation for a Severe Pandemic.*) The communications coordinator will ensure that your municipal chain of command is followed and that the appropriate information is communicated to the population in a timely and consistent fashion.

In a crisis, you must develop and deliver key messages that help you meet your communications goals. Key messages articulate information that is of the highest importance and convey what is urgent to know or do at a given time. As the crisis changes, your key messages may also change. You will develop your key messages in response to the different stages of the emergency and in response to how the crisis affects the behaviors and perceptions of the audience. Plan to develop key messages that communicate what the public needs to do but that also address the needs of the audience for facts or reassurance. Help your public move forward through the crisis. (See Handout 2.)

UNDERSTANDING TARGET AUDIENCES AND THEIR CONCERNS
What they will want to know first

Public	News Media	Other Stakeholders (Businesses, NGOs, Religious Organizations)
Am I safe?	What happened?	How will my group be affected?
Is my family safe?	Has it been contained?	What resources will we have to mobilize to ensure the safety of our members?
What have you found that may affect me?	Who is in charge?	What is our role in the overall response and how will it impact our group?
What can I do to protect myself and my family?	Are people in need being helped?	
Who/what caused this?	What can we expect?	
Can you fix it?	What should we do?	

It is a good idea to seek input from advisors representing different audiences with whom you need to communicate. They can keep you up to date on the changing concerns, information needs, and priorities of their groups. Coordinate and collaborate with other credible sources who will help you get your key messages across, perhaps with greater effectiveness. For example, consider involving representatives from groups such as youth, religious, labor, business, and indigenous communities.

GUIDELINES FOR PREPARING CLEAR AND CONCISE MESSAGES FOR CRISES AND EMERGENCIES

- Identify what you most want the target audience to know and to do.
- Identify what you need to do to correct misperceptions or erroneous information (for more information on responding to rumors and misinformation, see Tool 14, *News Media Communication*).
- Prepare three key messages that communicate your principal *talking points*. Leaders and spokespersons should have talking points, a list of subjects they want to cover, whenever they speak to the public.
 - Remember that during crises anxiety or fear can make it harder for people to process (hear and interpret) information than during normal situations.

- The amount of information delivered should be succinct and limited to the most important information.
- Crisis communication experts recommend that you limit your messages to the three most important to ensure the audience remembers them.
- Prepare supporting points for each key message.
- Develop support materials for each message (e.g., visuals, examples, quotes, personal stories, analogies, or instructions for obtaining additional information; a sample of a flyer highlighting one set of key messages is included as Handout 5).
- Keep messages simple and short.
- Document in writing recommended messages and support materials.
- Practice delivering your key messages.

One of the most powerful tools you can use to help you organize and focus your key messages is a **message map**. A message map is an outline to keep in your head or on a notepad that has supporting points or information for each key message. A template for creating your own is included at the end of this tool (see Handout 3). A message map should be prepared for any crisis or emergency. Involve key members of your local municipal team, communications professionals, and community leaders in the development and testing of messages.

During a time of crisis, especially when fear and rumors influence people’s understanding and trust, it is important to stay on message. In other words, communicators must remain constantly focused on their key messages and state them as clearly as possible at the outset of a communication (for example, at the beginning of an interview or press conference). Then they stay on message by returning to their points as often as possible.

You can plan opportunities to return to your key messages before you participate in an interview or press conference. You can decide, ahead of time, exactly how you will integrate your key messages at the beginning, middle, and end of the interview or conference.

Below is an example of staying on message (using the key message provided earlier) when telling the people of your municipality how they can respond during a pandemic.

Ways to “Stay on Message”	
At the beginning of your interview say	“I want to begin by saying that... there are things people can do to keep the disease from spreading.They can wash their hands frequently; cover their sneeze or cough; if they are sick, wear a mask around others; and avoid public gatherings.”
Sometime later say	“As I said a moment ago... there are precautions people should take to stay healthy.They should wash their hands frequently; cover their sneeze or cough; if they are sick, wear a mask around others; and avoid public gatherings.”
When you answer a question say	“That’s an important question, but before I answer it I want to stress again that... people can take a number of specific steps to help in this time of crisis.They can wash their hands frequently; cover their sneeze or cough; if they are sick, wear a mask around others; and avoid public gatherings.”
At the end say	“Before I close, I want to remind everyone... to take the recommended precautions.Wash your hands frequently. Cover your sneeze and cough. If you are sick, wear a mask around others. And remember to avoid public gatherings where the disease can spread easily.”

Staying on Message

- Raise your points often enough that your audience leaves with a clear understanding of the message you wanted them to hear.
- Take opportunities to begin or end statements with a reiteration of your message.
- Understand that repeating a single point too many times may create the appearance that you are trying too hard to convince people of something that is not true, so don’t repeat your message word-for-word every time you answer a question.

COMMUNITY COMMUNICATIONS CHANNELS MAPPING

Step 1: Gather information

1. List all the communication channels and mass media in your community. Include channels and media that service your community even if they are not physically present in your locality.
2. List all the different communication needs that your community has and might have in a future crisis. For example, your community might need a way to make radio announcements in an emergency. Or you may need to keep a supply of paper on hand to make flyers.
3. Once the lists are complete, mark the channels or media that are used for each communication need, corresponding to each of your audiences.
4. Make notes on the effectiveness of the communication channel for reaching the audience for that particular need.

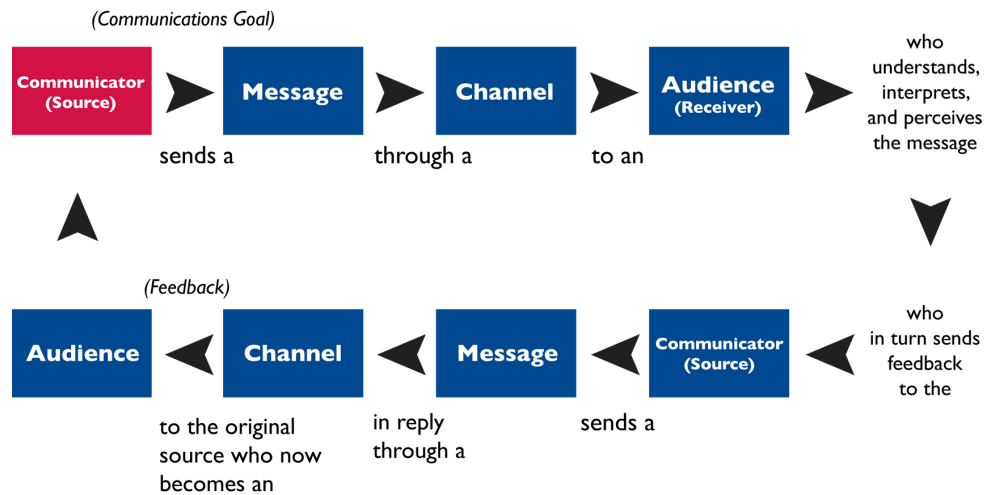
Step 2: Evaluate

1. Are the channels and communication needs matched as well as they could be?
2. Are there any gaps in the communication?
3. What do you need to change/develop in the future?

THE CHANNEL

Communications are delivered in many ways. Professional communicators call the methods of delivering a message the *channels* over which the message is sent. Messages may go out over a variety of channels used to convey information, including anything from loud speakers, amateur shortwave radio, billboards, posters and flyers, newspapers, radio, and television to cell phones or the Internet. To become an effective communicator, you should determine how to use the best method to reach each target audience. This includes understanding and selecting the most appropriate communication channels to enhance your message's impact by reaching your audience at the right time and the right place.

BASIC ELEMENTS OF COMMUNICATIONS



Adapted from: P. Oakley and C. Garforth, *Guide to extension training* (Rome, Italy: Food and Agriculture Organization, 1985)

Channel selection during normal situations is key to successful delivery; during a crisis this choice becomes even more critical. You may have already found that during a crisis the normal lines of communication can fail just when you need them most. Yet success often requires you to reach your audience quickly—whether that audience is just a handful of people or tens of thousands—particularly during a crisis. Identifying effective communication channels to reach groups such as youth, rural communities, and people who are displaced can be a daunting but critical task.

Before you face a crisis, consider mapping out the communication channels in your community. This map will help ensure you are aware of the right communication channels and options to address the informational needs of your audience. It can also help you determine whether there are any gaps in the existing communication network.

Use the steps in the box to the left and Handout 4 to create your own communication channel map.

WHY IS COMMUNICATION DURING A CRISIS OR EMERGENCY ESSENTIAL?

Communities expect to hear from their leaders in times of crisis. They want to know if they are safe and what is being done to protect them. Sharing information in a timely and accurate manner can help dispel rumors and misunderstandings that

might otherwise result in fear, panic, suspicion, or indifference. When the correct information is disseminated quickly, it can reduce death and suffering.

Communicating in an opportune, transparent, and credible manner during a crisis situation is a key leadership skill. Keep in mind that communicating during crises and emergencies is different from communicating during normal conditions. This makes crisis communication an important part of your overall leadership approach to addressing an influenza pandemic.

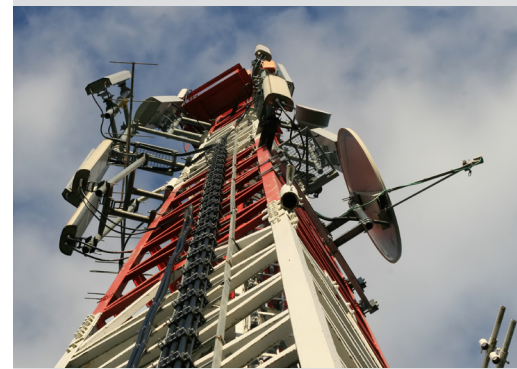
During a crisis, unpredictable and unusual events, or unstable and dangerous situations may bring about abrupt change. The challenges that you and your community may face during a severe influenza pandemic are unimaginable. You may have dealt with past crisis situations and observed that each one evolves in phases and that the communication required must evolve in tandem. Understanding the pattern of a crisis can help communicators anticipate the information needs of the public, stakeholders, and the media.

Below are a set of communication tasks corresponding to the stages of crisis designed to assist you in your preparation and implementation.

COMMUNICATION TASKS

Stage I: Pre-Crisis

- Identify the organizational structure responsible for communication activities, such as a **communications command center**, communication coordinator, and **communications support team**.
- Identify roles and responsibilities across government units, the emergency response team, the communication coordinator, and the communications support team.
- Identify communications goals.
- Identify target audiences to communicate with, and evaluate their information needs and communication preferences.
- Identify communication resources and channels you can use to reach and influence your target audiences.
- Ensure that the communication coordinator is included in the emergency response team.
- Prepare a communications plan.
- Plan roles for the news media, such as keeping the population informed about important government and community actions.
- Prepare lists of contacts for the media, the emergency response team, and the municipality's emergency services.
- Hold meetings with key media personnel to discuss collaborative communications plans and needs.
- Prepare basic **press releases** that can be quickly adapted during a crisis. (At the end of this tool you will find a press release template that you can use for this purpose.)
- Establish standard operating procedures for communication activities, including the flow of information between the communications support team, municipal government agencies, technical experts, and authorized decisionmakers.
- Implement simulation exercises for the first steps of your communications plan.
- Conduct training as needed.





Stage 2: At the Beginning of the Crisis

- Inform your target audiences about the crisis, and explain the government's response.
- Offer empathy to people directly affected by the crisis.
- Explain risks associated with the pandemic illness.
- Establish the credibility of leaders, government, and partners.
- Recommend important practices for businesses, households, and schools.
- Strengthen alliances with sectors of your community.
- Conduct media monitoring.

Stage 3: During the Crisis

- Identify your municipality's communication needs.
- Explain ongoing risks as well as new risks.
- Inform the public about and explain government decisions.
- Provide updates on the situation as needed.
- Obtain support for government actions among stakeholders and communities through meetings, open communication lines, and other tactics.
- Gather feedback on communication actions; adjust messages and communications as needed.
- Inform the public about the municipality's needs and the ways in which the public can help.
- Recommend important practices for specific individuals or groups.

Stage 4: Recovering from the Crisis

- Explain to the public that the crisis has ended.
- Explain government decisions.
- Recommend important actions to get life and commerce back to normal.
- Convene representatives of all sectors to assess results, propose solutions, and determine next steps.

STAGE 5: Post-Crisis

- Evaluate the effectiveness of communication during the crisis.
- Identify lessons learned.
- Refine communications plans for future use.

(For more information that will help you to complete these tasks, see Tool 13, *Communications Plan Implementation for a Severe Pandemic*; Tool 17, *Volunteer Coordination*; and Tool 15, *Disaster Management in a Pandemic*.)

IDENTIFYING SPECIFIC TARGET AUDIENCES

Use this worksheet when you write key messages to help you consider your target audiences.

Specific target audience	Key points, facts, characteristics to consider about this audience
Individuals immediately impacted by the pandemic illness	
Families of anyone immediately impacted by the pandemic illness	
The news media	
Civic leaders	
Business leaders	
Municipal government employees	
Neighboring municipalities, towns, or countries	
Individuals with special needs and their families	
Vulnerable populations	
Healthcare providers	
Indigenous communities	
Visitors, tourists	
Others	

DEVELOPING KEY MESSAGES

Use the key questions/concerns included below to help you prepare key messages.

Key Question/Concern	Key points/facts to include in your messages
What is the current situation? What measures is the local government taking to reduce the risk?	
What specific information do you have about the current stage of the pandemic? What details do you have about how it is affecting your municipality?	
What information do you still need to know? How are you going to find out?	
What are the symptoms of the influenza pandemic? How does the illness spread?	
Who is at risk? Which populations are most vulnerable to this risk?	
How can people protect themselves?	
What precautions should individuals and communities take? If exposed, when should people contact their health providers?	
Other key questions/concerns:	

MESSAGE MAP WORKSHEET FOR WRITING KEY MESSAGES WITH SUPPORTING DETAILS

When planning your communications to the public, use this message map template to focus and organize messages before an emergency takes place.

Message Map Template		
Specific Audience: _____		
Specific Question or Concern: _____		
Key Message 1	Key Message 2	Key Message 3
Supporting Information 1-A	Supporting Information 2-A	Supporting Information 3-A
Supporting Information 1-B	Supporting Information 2-B	Supporting Information 3-B
Supporting Information 1-C	Supporting Information 2-C	Supporting Information 3-C

WORKSHEET FOR DEVELOPING A COMMUNICATIONS CHANNEL MAP

When identifying your communication channels, use this map template to determine and coordinate delivery of messages.

List all the communication channels and mass media in your community. Include channels and media servicing your community even if they are not physically located in your locality.

List all the different communication needs that your community has and may have in the foreseeable future.

Once the lists are complete, mark the channel or media that is used for each communication need corresponding to each one of your audiences.

Make notes on the effectiveness of the communication channel for the need (examples are provided in some of the spaces below).

Communication Channels	Communication Needs				Notes
	Urgent messages to central government	Urgent messages to the municipal leadership team	Messages to essential services workers	Messages to schools	
Fax to offices	Need updated fax numbers for emergencies				
Cascade (word of mouth)		Messages may be miscommunicated or become rumors			Need a clear message that is repeated or updated
Internet			The Internet does not always work		
Radio				Parents can listen each morning to find out if schools are closed	Need to coordinate with school officials
Television			Social distancing in the workplace can be shown in a video		
Newspapers					Good for explaining hygiene messages

SAMPLE KEY MESSAGES FLYER

THE FOUR INFLUENZA FIGHTERS

COVER COUGHS AND SNEEZES



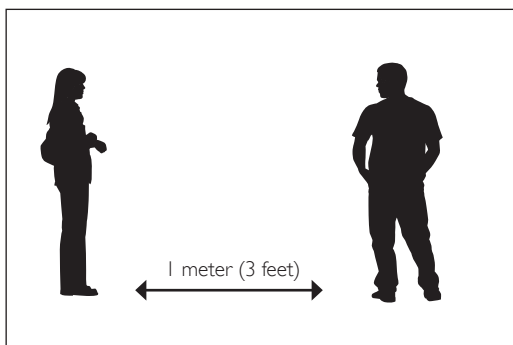
Cover coughs and sneezes with your arm, a tissue, cloth, or mask. Throw out used tissues and sanitize surfaces people have touched, coughed, or sneezed on.

WASH YOUR HANDS



Wash your hands frequently with soap and water for 15–20 seconds, rinse, and dry on a clean towel. Or use an alcohol-based hand gel.

KEEP YOUR DISTANCE



During an influenza pandemic, stand at least one meter away from others and do not shake hands. Limit travel and avoid crowds. Work from home if possible.

SEPARATE SICK PEOPLE



Stay home if you are sick. Keep sick children home from school. If you have any influenza symptoms, stay home for at least 48 hours, or until everyone in the household is well.

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