

# HINI, Hockey equipment and you

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Ron Kuipers [The Equipment Guy](#)

The 2009/10 minor hockey season is expected to provide organizers, coaches, players and parents with all the usual highlights and challenges that make up a Canadian winter at the rink. This year, however, there's an additional challenge most hockey families have never had to confront. It's the H1N1 virus and all the speculation and uncertainty surrounding it.

The H1N1 influenza virus is expected to have a much more dramatic impact on Canadians than any other flu virus in recent memory. For hockey players gathering two or three times a week for games and practices, the spread of H1N1 could result in half-empty dressing rooms and shortened benches for the next few months.

So far, the spread of H1N1 has created more questions than answers. Hockey parents are wondering if the virus can live on hockey equipment. Kids want to know if there's anything they can do to help prevent the spread of the virus. Coaches and managers want to be armed with as much information as possible in the event the H1N1 virus hits their team harder than expected.

Some of these H1N1 questions and concerns lead straight into the dressing room and the wet and sweaty equipment the virus might thrive on.

## Handling hockey equipment

Dr. Ashley Roberts is a Pediatric Infections Disease specialist with the Rouge Valley Health System in Toronto. According to Dr. Roberts, the H1N1 virus can remain alive on most hard and soft surfaces, including hockey equipment.

"Generally speaking, the virus remains on hard surfaces like plastics and metals for about 48 hours and on soft surfaces like clothing, towels and tissues for about 8 to 12 hours," said Dr. Roberts.

So if the flu virus is living on the equipment, is there anything parents and players can do to keep the flu at bay other than the usual practice of 'airing it out' after games and practices? Dr. Roberts says keeping your hands clean after handling equipment is the number one preventative measure.

"The most important thing parents and kids can do is to be very vigilant about hand washing, either with soap and water or alcohol-based hand rub, after using the equipment," said Dr. Roberts. "I'd recommend bringing little bottles of hand sanitizer with you to the rink."

## Hockey Canada stresses prevention

Dr. Mark Aubry is the Chief Medical Officer for Hockey Canada and he suggested a similar approach in a recent directive he sent out to minor hockey associations across Canada.

Dr. Aubry's H1N1 prevention recommendations include:

- Players should be encouraged to wash hands routinely and always after handling hockey equipment. Frequent hand washing with soap and water is one of the best preventions we can recommend.
- Teams are encouraged to carry extra hand soap or hand sanitizer as not all arenas have them readily available.
- Players must have their own water bottle labeled with names and player numbers.

- Towels should be removed from all benches and should not be shared at the rink.

Dr. Aubry also encourages coaches and parents to help protect their young hockey players' immune system by making sure "they get sufficient sleep, that they don't over-train and that they get proper nutrition."

### **Hand-washing and hygiene**

Todd Jackson is Hockey Canada's Senior Manager of Safety and Insurance and he agrees with the medical experts when it comes to hockey players doing their part to help prevent the spread of H1N1.

"That's where it goes back to the washing of the hands. Kids making sure that the hygiene is kept number one," said Jackson. "After the game, it's not a bad idea for kids to wash their hands and it's not a bad idea for parents to make sure that it occurs."

Jackson would also like to remind parents to keep their kids' equipment clean. If you do nothing else, hang everything up or spread it out on the floor after each on-ice session so it has a chance to dry.

You may want to get go back to the Equipment Guy archive and read this article on [Keeping your equipment clean](#).

### **Should we share?**

A few times a season, a familiar cry comes up in the dressing room just before game time and it sounds something like this: "I can't find my neckguard!" or "I left my gloves at home!" Normally, someone digs deep into their equipment bag and finds a spare and the kids are good to go.

But what happens if the H1N1 flu season is in full swing? Can those kids still participate by borrowing another player's neck guard or gloves? Both Dr. Roberts and Jackson agree that it's okay to let them play.

"You're not going to stop everything from occurring. You're not going to stop kids from sharing equipment or passing a water bottle," said Jackson. "But we have to do our best to make sure that hygiene is kept as a priority and it's up to the parents and coaches and everyone involved in making sure they do that."

"Although it's best to avoid sharing equipment, if both kids are feeling well and are practicing good hand hygiene, it will likely be fine," said Dr. Roberts.

### **An un-healthy scratch**

If, however, a player or coach isn't feeling well and shows any signs of flu-like illness, he or she is expected to see a physician and to stay away from the team until fully recovered.

So don't come to the rink if you're feeling sick and wash your hands often, especially after hockey. Don't share water bottles with teammates and keep your equipment dry and clean. It's all part of the Canadian minor hockey game plan heading into what might be one of the toughest head-to-head matchups against influenza we've seen in a long time.

"We're certainly not panicking but we're taking a preventative, pro-active approach," said Jackson. "We want to keep the hockey environment as healthy as we can."

And keep the dressing room as full as possible during the 2009/10 hockey and flu season.

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