

INFLUENZA SELF-CARE



It's in
your hands

How to care for yourself
and others with influenza

This resource gives valuable information on:

- seasonal influenza;
- pandemic influenza;
- how to prevent influenza;
- how to help yourself and others when influenza happens; and
- when to seek medical care.

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What is influenza?

Influenza (often called "the flu") is a respiratory disease that affects the nose, throat and lungs. It is caused by a virus that is easily passed from person to person. As with other viral illnesses, antibiotics do not work against an influenza virus. Antiviral medications may be used for treatment or prevention of influenza. Various strains of influenza virus circulate throughout the world each year. In Canada, seasonal influenza usually affects people during the winter, between November and April. Influenza viruses change slightly from year to year. Every year, seasonal influenza infects millions of Canadians. This has a significant effect on the health care system and school or work absenteeism.

You can play an active role in staying healthy and preventing the spread of influenza.

An influenza infection lowers the body's ability to fight other infections. This can lead to pneumonia or bronchitis. Other health conditions such as diabetes, lung disease, heart disease, kidney disease and cancer can also make influenza worse. Most healthy people are able to recover from influenza without severe complications.

What is an influenza pandemic?

An influenza pandemic is declared when a new strain of influenza virus that has never been seen before emerges and begins to spread quickly around the world. People have little or no natural immunity to the new virus and large numbers of people become ill. An influenza pandemic occurs three to four times each century.

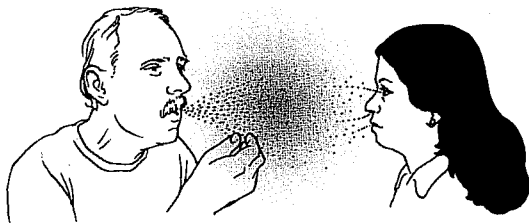
The pandemic (H1N1) 2009 influenza virus is a new strain of the influenza A virus. This virus spread quickly around the world and in June 2009, the World Health Organization declared an influenza pandemic.

To date, most people with pandemic (H1N1) 2009 influenza virus have had mild disease and have not required special medical treatment.

How is influenza spread?

Influenza spreads rapidly among people. The influenza virus passes from person to person by droplets when an infected person coughs or sneezes. Droplets travel through the air up to two metres (six feet) allowing the virus to enter the eyes, nose or mouth of people nearby. The virus can live on hard surfaces such as door handles, telephones, computer keyboards, light switches, countertops and soft surfaces such as clothing. Viruses can live on hard surfaces for up to 48 hours. Infection can occur when people touch any surface contaminated with the virus and then touch either their own mouth or nose, or someone else's mouth or nose, before washing their hands.

People usually develop symptoms of influenza within four days after becoming infected. They are usually contagious for seven days after the symptoms start. Children, especially younger children, individuals with weakened immune systems and those with severe illness may be contagious for a longer period, i.e. up to 10 days.



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What are the symptoms?

Symptoms of influenza include:

- Fever of 38C (100.4F) or higher that starts suddenly;
- A dry cough that can last for weeks;
- Headache, pain in legs and lower back;
- Feeling weak and tired; and
- Some people may also experience nausea, vomiting and diarrhea.

Other symptoms can include:

- Chills;
- Loss of appetite;
- Sore throat; and
- Runny or stuffy nose.

Note:

- Fever may not be prominent in children younger than five years of age or those 65 years of age and older.
- Fever usually goes down and the person starts to feel better in three to five days. However, exhaustion and cough can continue for several weeks.
- Symptoms in babies may be hard to detect. For some babies, crying more than usual may be the only sign of illness.

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What is the difference between influenza, a cold, or stomach upset?

Description/ Symptoms	Respiratory Infection		Gastrointestinal Infection
	Influenza	Common Cold	Stomach Upset
Virus Involved	Influenza A or B	Many different kinds of viruses (e.g., rhinovirus, coronavirus, adenovirus, etc.	Norovirus (i.e., Norwalk-like viruses) is the most common
Fever	Usually high with sudden onset and lasts three to four days	Sometimes	Rarely
Headache	Usually, can be severe	Rarely	Sometimes
Chills, aches, pain	Usually and often severe	Rarely	Common
Loss of appetite	Sometimes	Sometimes	Frequently – usually nausea, vomiting and diarrhea occur as well
Cough	Usually	Sometimes	Rarely
Sore throat	Sometimes	Sometimes	Rarely
Sniffles or sneezes	Sometimes	Usually	Rarely
Extreme tiredness	Usually – may last two or three weeks or more	Rarely	Sometimes
Involves whole body	Usually	Never	Stomach and bowel only
Symptoms appear quickly	Yes	More gradual	Yes
Complications	Pneumonia, kidney failure, swelling of the brain and death	Sinus infection or ear infection	Dehydration (i.e., losing more fluid than you take in)
Vaccine	Yearly seasonal vaccine plus the pandemic (H1N1) 2009 influenza vaccine	No vaccine available	No vaccine available

Note: A stomach upset is sometimes incorrectly called the "stomach flu". There is no such illness as "stomach flu". Stomach upsets are caused by viruses and other microorganisms but not by the influenza virus.

How to protect yourself and others against influenza

✓ Choose to immunize

Since the influenza virus is always changing, the seasonal influenza vaccine is updated each year based on the recommendation of the World Health Organization. The seasonal influenza vaccine contains the three virus strains most likely to circulate in the coming year. This means you need to be immunized every year. The best time to be immunized is during October and November, just before the influenza season starts. It takes about two weeks for the vaccine to work, however, it is never too late to be immunized; even after influenza arrives in the community.

Influenza vaccines **cannot** cause influenza because the virus in the vaccine has been killed. The vaccine is 70 to 90 per cent effective in young, healthy people and protection usually lasts less than one year. Some people who are immunized might still get influenza, but they generally have milder symptoms and are less likely to have serious medical complications from the infection. Some people may also get ill from a strain of influenza that was not covered by the vaccine.

The vaccine doesn't work as well for people with weakened immune systems, however if they are immunized, the illness is usually less severe if they do become infected. Since vaccine strains are selected six to nine months before the start of influenza season, there is a chance that the circulating strain may change before the season actually starts.

The vaccine does not protect against other respiratory illnesses such as the common cold.

The vaccine to protect against the pandemic (H1N1) 2009 influenza virus will be available in November 2009 to Albertans six months and older.

Who should be immunized?

Immunization for seasonal influenza is strongly encouraged for individuals who are at risk of serious complications from influenza, such as pneumonia.

Those who would benefit most from immunization include

- People 65 years and older;
- People living in continuing care and designated assisted living;
- Health care workers in settings such as continuing care and designated assisted living;
- Adults and children with certain chronic conditions including but not limited to heart conditions, respiratory conditions such as asthma, and diabetes;

- Pregnant women; and
- Healthy children six – 23 months old.

The pandemic (H1N1) 2009 influenza virus vaccine will be offered to all Albertans older than six months. However, not everyone can be immunized the same time. High-risk groups are encouraged to get their immunization early.

Those who would benefit most from immunization include:

- Those under age 65 with a chronic illness;
- Pregnant women;
- Children aged six months up to five years;
- People living in remote communities;
- Health care workers; and
- Those who care for infants or people with health problems.

Who should NOT be immunized?

- People who are very allergic to eggs, because eggs are used to make the vaccine.
- People who have severe allergies to any part of the vaccine or those who have had an anaphylactic reaction to a previous influenza vaccine.
- People who developed Guillain-Barré syndrome within eight weeks of a previous influenza immunization.
- Influenza vaccine is not licensed for babies younger than six months of age.

Possible vaccine reactions

- The most common reaction is mild pain and/or swelling where the injection was given.
- Some people may have fever, feel tired and have muscle aches six – 12 hours after they get the vaccine. This may last for one or two days.
- Some people have reported red eyes, runny nose, and shortness of breath or chest tightness after receiving the influenza vaccine. These symptoms were usually mild and went away within 24 hours.
- As with any immunization, unexpected or unusual side effects can occur. Severe allergic reactions (anaphylaxis) are rare.

Where to get immunized?

- For detailed information on locations and times of influenza immunization clinics near you, or to find out more information about high-risk groups that will receive priority immunization, visit:

www.albertahealthservices.ca or

www.healthlinkalberta.ca or

call **Health Link Alberta**

In Edmonton, call **780-408-5465**.

In Calgary, call **403-943-5465**.

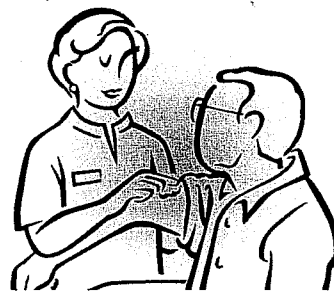
Elsewhere in Alberta call toll-free **1-866-408-5465**.

Pneumococcal (pneumonia) vaccine

Pneumonia can sometimes occur after an influenza infection. Pneumococcal vaccine protects against the bacteria that most often causes pneumonia. This vaccine is provided free-of-charge to those who are at risk, including:

- People aged 65 years and older;
- Residents of long-term care facilities;
- People two years of age and older with certain chronic health conditions; and
- People living in homeless or chronically disadvantaged situations.

Most people only need to receive the pneumococcal immunization once in their lives. The vaccine can be given at any time of the year and can be administered at the same time as the influenza vaccine. Pneumococcal vaccine for babies is included in Alberta's routine immunization program.



✓ Clean your hands!

Next to immunization, the single most important way to prevent influenza is to clean your hands frequently and thoroughly.

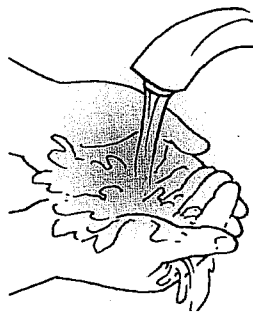
Clean your hands before:

- Handling or eating food or feeding others;
- Brushing or flossing teeth;
- Putting in or taking out contact lenses; and
- Treating wounds or cuts.

Clean your hands after:

- Coughing or sneezing;
- Blowing your nose or wiping someone else's nose;
- Having contact with a person who has symptoms of influenza;
- Going to the toilet, helping someone else use the toilet or changing a diaper;
- Treating wounds or cuts;
- Handling garbage; and
- Returning home from school, work or shopping.

Children should clean their hands after playing with toys shared with other children.



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Encourage children to clean their hands often

- Teach by example.
- Help young children clean their hands.
- Make sure the sink, soap and towels are within reach.
- Place hand washing reminders at eye level for children.

How to clean hands with soap and water

- Use regular soap (liquid or bar soap). Antibacterial soap is not necessary.
- Wet hands with warm, running water and lather well.
- Rub the hands together for about the amount of time it would take to sing the song, *Twinkle, Twinkle Little Star*, (about 15 – 20 seconds).
- Scrub all over, including the backs of the hands, the wrists, between the fingers and under the finger nails.
- Rinse under running water (for about 10 seconds).
- Dry with a clean or disposable towel.
- If using a public restroom, use a disposable towel to turn off the faucet to avoid further contact with the tap.
- Store liquid soaps in closed containers and do not top up liquid soap containers. When the soap container is empty, it should be washed and dried before refilling with liquid soap.

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How to clean hands with alcohol-based hand rubs (gels, liquids and foams)

- When soap and water are not available, hand rubs are an excellent choice to use.
- Use only alcohol-based hand rubs. They should contain at least 60 per cent alcohol.
- Put some of the hand rub (gel, liquid or foam) on the palm of your hand and rub your hands together.
- Cover all surfaces, including fingers and wrists, and rub until dry (about 15 – 25 seconds).
- Hand rubs don't work if hands are soiled. When hands are soiled, wash them with soap and water. If soap and water are not available, use a towelette that contains detergent. Then use the hand rub.
- Young children need help when using hand rubs. This is to make sure that their hands are dry before they touch anything or put their hands in their mouths.

✓ Cover your nose and mouth with a tissue when sneezing or coughing

- If you don't have a tissue, cough or sneeze into your arm, not into your hands.
- Throw away tissues after wiping your nose or covering a cough.
- Clean hands after coughing, sneezing or using tissues.
- Keep your hands and fingers away from your eyes, nose and mouth.

✓ Stay home if you are sick

- Stay home from work or school when ill until you are feeling better. Avoid leaving home unless medical care is needed.
- Avoid close contact with others while contagious (usually for seven days) if possible.

✓ Stay healthy

- Eat healthy foods and stay physically active to keep your immune system strong.
For information on healthy eating and active living, go to: www.healthyalberta.com
- Rest and get plenty of sleep.
- Don't smoke. Avoid second hand smoke.

✓ Other ways to protect yourself and others against influenza

- Avoid large gatherings when influenza is circulating in your community to minimize exposure to the virus.
- Visit those who have influenza only if necessary, and stand more than two metres (six feet) away from them.
- Keep personal items separate if a household member is sick. Clean surfaces around them with regular household cleaners.
- Do not share personal items or drinks.
- Clean shared surfaces such as door handles, light switches, telephones, computer keyboards, etc. frequently with regular household cleaners.

✓ Be prepared

Everyone should plan ahead in case they become ill with influenza. This is especially important if you live alone, are a single parent or a caregiver.

- Put together a home preparedness kit before anyone gets sick.
- Have non-perishable foods, fluids and health and cleaning supplies, such as tissues, alcohol based hand sanitizer, medication for fever and a thermometer on hand.
- Arrange for a backup caregiver for loved ones, in case you are ill. The best caregiver is someone who does not have risk factors for complications of influenza e.g. people with health problems or women who are pregnant.
- Have a back-up plan if child care facilities or schools close and you must continue working.
- If you are at risk of complications, talk to your health care provider about what to do if you get sick.



How to manage influenza in adults

General self-care measures

- Drink extra fluids to prevent or treat for dehydration.
- Gargle with a warm salt water mixture. Mix: *One teaspoon (5 ml) of salt, one teaspoon (5 ml) of baking soda, and two cups (500 ml) of water.*
- Use throat lozenges.
- Use saline nose drops or sprays.
- Use a humidifier to put water in the air. Always follow the manufacturer's directions for the use and proper care of your humidifier.
- Talk to others about concerns and ask for help if needed. Keeping in touch by phone or email can help with feelings of loneliness when sick.
- Eat healthy foods.
- Get plenty of rest and sleep.

Note: If the above suggestions do not work, review the guidelines for using over-the-counter (non-prescription) medications on next page.

Over-the-counter medications

General guidelines

Before using an over-the-counter medication, you should know:

- how to use it (e.g., how much to use and how often);
- how long to use it;
- the possible side effects; and
- when to seek medical attention.

Note: Speak with a pharmacist or other health care provider if you are unsure about any of these points.

- Follow the instructions on the label. Pay particular attention to when the medication should **not** be used.
- To prevent adverse reactions or taking unnecessary medication, use an over-the-counter product that contains the least number of active ingredients required to treat your symptoms.
- Try “regular strength” products before “extra strength” and only take the dose recommended.
- If you are taking more than one medication at a time, check the labels to avoid taking the same ingredient twice.
- Check the expiry date on medications in your home. Take outdated medications to a pharmacy for disposal.
- Keep all medications out of the reach of children.

For muscle pain and fever

Use acetaminophen (may be the best choice for some people) or ibuprofen. There are cautions with the use of

both of these medications. Speak with a pharmacist or health care provider if you have any questions.

Note: Acetaminophen, when taken in high doses or with other medication or alcohol, may affect the liver or kidneys. Ibuprofen may upset the stomach and cause fluid (water) retention.

For a cough

If you have a dry cough that prevents you from sleeping or causes chest discomfort, you may wish to try a medication with dextromethorphan (DM).

For a stuffy nose

Try saline nose drops or sprays first.

- Nose drops or sprays act quickly and may cause fewer side effects than medications taken by mouth.
- Saline nose drops or sprays should only be used for two or three days because with longer use, nose stuffiness (congestion) can actually get worse.

Try a decongestant if saline nose drops or sprays don't work.

- Decongestants may cause side effects like rapid heartbeat and sleeping problems and should not be used in some cases.
- Speak with a pharmacist or health care provider and always read the label carefully before using a decongestant product.

For a sore throat

- If gargling with salt water has not worked, you may wish to try lozenges or throat sprays.
- Products with dyclonine will numb the throat while some other products have a soothing effect.

Complementary medicines

- Some people may wish to try complementary therapies such as herbal remedies.
- It is important to find out as much as possible about the type of product you are thinking of taking as some complementary products should not be used in certain situations.
- It is recommended you talk to your pharmacist or health care provider before taking these products.

When to seek medical care

Seek medical advice if you or people in your care are at risk of severe illness from influenza, for example if they:

- Have heart or lung disease or any other chronic medical condition;
- Have a weakened immune system;
- Are pregnant;
- Are frail; and/or
- Are obese.

Seek **emergency medical** care if you, or someone in your care, have any of the following symptoms:

- Shortness of breath while resting or doing very little activity;
- Difficult or painful breathing;

- Coughing up bloody sputum (spit);
- Increased wheezing;
- Chest pain;
- Fever for three or four days without improvement;
- Feeling better then suddenly having a high fever or becoming ill again;
- Extreme drowsiness and difficulty awakening;
- Disorientation or confusion;
- Severe earache;
- Sudden inability to function in a normally independent, elderly person; or
- Have constant vomiting or diarrhea, especially in an elderly person.

Prescription medications

Antiviral medication:

- Can decrease the length and severity of the illness;
- Should be started within 48 hours after the first symptoms appear in order to work its best; and
- May be prescribed by a doctor for prevention or treatment of influenza

Influenza viruses can become resistant to some antiviral medications if the drugs are not carefully used. This means the drugs are no longer effective to treat the illness.

Antibiotic medication:

- is not usually prescribed for influenza but your doctor may prescribe these medications for complications such as pneumonia.

Managing influenza in children

Symptoms to look for in children

Children older than five years of age and adolescents with influenza may have the same symptoms as adults, but there are some differences in babies and toddlers. Seasonal influenza is more severe in children younger than five years of age and especially, for those younger than two years of age.

Watch for the following symptoms in babies and toddlers.

- Fever may be the only symptom of influenza that a young child has.
- Severity of fever in young children with influenza, especially those under the age of three years can vary significantly. Toddlers and babies usually have higher temperatures, often over 39.5C (103.1F) although some infants may have only a very mild fever or no fever at all.
- Some babies may not be able to drink fluids or breast feed.

- Seizures or stiff neck may appear in some babies. Young children may also have headache, vomiting, irritability and sensitive eyes.
- About half of children three years of age or younger have symptoms such as nausea, vomiting, diarrhea and stomach pain.
- Influenza viruses may cause croup (coughing), pneumonia or bronchitis in young children.
- Ear infections and red, sore eyes are more frequent in young children. Sore muscles are also common.

Note: Toddlers and babies are not able to tell people they have sore muscles or a headache. They may be irritable and eat poorly. They sometimes have a hoarse cry and a barking cough.

How to care for a child with influenza

For fever and muscle aches:

- Take the child's temperature (if you are able).
- Use Acetaminophen (Ibuprofen is another option, but it should **not** be used for babies younger than six months of age).
- Do not wake the child to give the medication.

Note: Children younger than 18 years of age **should not take acetylsalicylic acid (ASA)** or any products containing ASA. ASA may cause Reye's syndrome, a very serious condition affecting the nervous system and liver.

- Dress the child in lightweight clothing and keep room temperature at 20C (68F).
- Breast feed or offer oral rehydration solution e.g. Pedialyte®, water or juice often while the child is awake. Oral hydration solution can be purchased from pharmacies and grocery stores.
- Do not give cool baths or use alcohol rubs.
- Encourage the child to rest or involve them in quiet activities.
- Try saline nose drops to relieve a stuffy nose or calm a cough.
- Elevate the head of the bed; babies may be more comfortable in a car seat or a baby swing.
- Use a humidifier, except with asthmatic children.
 - Failure to maintain your humidifier can result in additional health problems.
 - Always follow the manufacturer's directions for the use and proper care of your humidifier.



Over-the-counter medication

For children younger than six years of age

- Health Canada recommends that over-the-counter cough and cold medications **should not be used** in children younger than six years of age.
 - These products have not been shown to reduce symptoms in children.
 - There have been reports of overdose, misuse and rare side effects.
 - Some of the serious side effects reported include such symptoms as convulsions, increased heart rate, decreased level of consciousness, unusual heart rhythms and hallucinations.
- Do not use VapoRub-type products on children younger than two years of age.

For children six years of age and older

- Do not give children medications labelled only for use in adults and/or those that do not include instructions for children.
- Over-the-counter medications should only be considered if the other suggestions previously described have not worked.
- Talk to your pharmacist or health care provider before using over-the-counter medications. They will help you to decide:
 - if an over-the-counter medication will lessen your child's symptoms; and
 - if the medication is safe for your child to take.

- When using over-the-counter medications to treat children older than six years of age:
 - Talk with your pharmacist or health care provider about:
 - how long the medication should be taken;
 - the dosage;
 - the possible side effects; and
 - when the product should not be used.
- Follow all the instructions carefully including the dosing and length-of-use directions.
- Use the medication dosing device, if one is included with the product, to ensure accurate dosing.
- Do not give more than one kind of cough or cold medication to children.

When to seek medical care for a child

Seek medical care if a child is ill and has any of the following conditions:

- Is younger than six months old.
- Has fever which continues to rise or stays the same after being treated with fever medication.
- Has a change in breathing (such as breathing fast) or difficulty breathing.
- Is very listless and loses interest in playing, watching TV, eating or drinking.
- Is very irritable and cries a lot.
- Urinates less than usual, for example:
 - has a dry diaper for more than three hours if younger than six months of age;

- has a dry diaper for longer than six hours if six – 23 months of age; and
- goes to the bathroom less often than every six hours while awake if two years of age or older.
- Looks very ill and the caregiver is worried.
- Has heart or lung disease or any other chronic medical condition requiring regular medical attention.
- Has a disease or is receiving treatments that weaken the immune system.
- Takes ASA regularly for a medical condition.

When to take a child to the emergency room

Call 9-1-1 right away if the child:

- Has severe trouble breathing that is not caused by a stuffy nose;
- Has blue lips or hands, suddenly becomes pale, or has cold legs up to their knees;
- Is very tired and unable to move;
- Is so sleepy and does not respond when you try to get them up;
- Shows signs of pain, such as headache or stiff neck, especially if they also have fever, are listless and their eyes are sensitive to light;
- Seems confused; and
- Has a seizure.



Dealing with stress or anxiety due to pandemic influenza

Concern over pandemic influenza can make some people anxious. It is normal to feel overwhelmed and more stressed, especially with all the media attention on pandemic influenza.

Signs you are worrying too much might include:

- Changing your daily routine (sleeping and eating habits, socializing, alcohol consumption, prescription drug use).
- Thinking about pandemic influenza a lot.
- Difficulty concentrating on tasks and making decisions.
- Not doing as well at work or school.
- Avoiding others and talking less.
- Intense feelings of irritability, anxiety or depression.

Preparing in advance and becoming more informed can help to reduce anxiety. The following steps can help you to prepare now to cope effectively and put the disease in perspective.

Get information: The best thing you can do is gather up-to-date information from a credible source in order to distinguish facts from rumours.

Be prepared: Have a plan in case you or those in your care become ill with influenza.

Talk about it: Talk about your feelings with someone you trust. This can be a family member, friend, religious leader, or teacher.

Build your resilience: Maintain a healthy lifestyle through proper diet, exercise and rest – this is your best defence against getting sick. Keep connected to your social networks.

Talk to your children: Pandemic influenza can be upsetting to children and teenagers too. It is important to discuss this subject with them through honest and sharing of age-appropriate information.

Support others: If you notice the behaviour of a loved one, friend or co-worker has changed, ask them how they are doing. If they are experiencing intense feelings of anxiety or hopelessness, they should contact their health care provider, or an employee support program.

Stay informed

For more information about influenza:

Call Health Link Alberta

In Edmonton, call 780-408-5465.

In Calgary, call 403-943-5465.

Elsewhere in Alberta call toll-free 1-866-408-5465.

Visit the following websites:

Health Link at www.healthlinkalberta.ca

Alberta Health and Wellness: www.health.alberta.ca

Alberta Health Services: www.albertahealthservices.ca

Public Health Agency of Canada:

www.phac-aspc.gc.ca or www.fightflu.ca

For additional copies of this resource contact:

Phone: 780-427-7164

E-mail: health.ahinform@gov.ab.ca

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