

# H1N1 (swine) Flu & You

Questions and Answers | Updated October 2009



## About H1N1

### What is H1N1 (swine) flu?

Pandemic H1N1 2009 (often referred to as “swine flu”) is a new strain of influenza virus causing illness in people. The virus began spreading from person-to-person in April 2009 and has spread worldwide, resulting in a global pandemic.

### Why is H1N1 sometimes called “swine flu”?

This virus was originally referred to as “swine flu” because laboratory testing showed it was very similar to influenza viruses that normally occur in pigs (swine). Further study has shown that this new virus has a mixture of genes from bird, pig and human influenzas.

### How does H1N1 virus spread?

H1N1 viruses spread the same way that seasonal flu spreads, mainly from person to person through uncovered or uncontrolled coughing or sneezing by people with influenza. Sometimes people may become infected by touching something – such as a surface or object – with flu viruses on it and then touching their mouth, nose or eyes (or someone else’s mouth, nose or eyes).

### Who is most at risk for catching pandemic H1N1?

The H1N1 virus spreads easily among children and young people, and has been infecting adults over 64 at a much lower rate. This is different than the illness pattern typically seen with the seasonal flu.

### What are the signs and symptoms of this virus?

The symptoms of H1N1 flu virus in people include:

- Fever (usually high;  $\geq 100^{\circ}\text{F}$ )
- Cough
- Sore throat
- Runny or stuffy nose
- Body aches
- Headache
- Chills
- Fatigue

Some people who have been infected with this virus also have had diarrhea and vomiting. Severe illnesses and deaths have happened as a result of becoming infected with this virus.

### How serious is H1N1 flu?

About 60% of people who have been hospitalized with H1N1 had one or more of the following medical conditions, which place people at “high risk” of serious flu-related complications: asthma, diabetes, heart disease, kidney disease and/or they were pregnant women, or were children younger than 5.

### Is H1N1 flu more serious than seasonal flu?

It is still very early to know how the H1N1 virus will compare to seasonal flu viruses and if it will be more serious. With seasonal flu, each year is different in terms of timing, duration and severity. Seasonal influenza can cause mild to severe illness, and at times can lead to death. Each year, in the United States, on average 36,000 people die from seasonal flu-related complications and more than 200,000 people are hospitalized from flu-related causes. Of those hospitalized, 20,000 are children younger than 5 years old. Over 90% of deaths and about 60% of hospitalization occur in people older than 65.

### How long is an infected person contagious?

People infected with either seasonal or H1N1 flu may be able to infect others from 1 day before symptoms develop to 5 to 7 days after. This can be longer in some people, especially children and people with weakened immune systems. Symptoms start 1 to 4 days after being exposed to the virus. This means people may be able to pass the flu on to someone else before knowing they are sick, as well as while they are sick.

### Where can I get accurate information about H1N1, vaccinations, and effective treatment?

There are many myths and inaccurate information out there. The following web sites and hotlines provide accurate, up-to-date information:

#### Centers for Disease Control & Prevention

[www.cdc.gov/h1n1flu](http://www.cdc.gov/h1n1flu)  
24 Hour Hotline: 800-CDC-INFO  
TTY: (888) 232-6348

#### Washington State Department of Health

[www.doh.wa.gov](http://www.doh.wa.gov)  
24 hour recorded info line: (888) 703-4364

#### Spokane Regional Health District

[www.srhd.org](http://www.srhd.org)  
Flu Hotline (509) 324-1495  
TDD: (509) 324-1464

# About the H1N1 Vaccine

There are two kinds of 2009 H1N1 vaccines being produced, the flu shot and a nasal spray. The H1N1 vaccines are currently being shipped to communities across the country. It will be given first to people who are at higher risk of illness and complications from infection. These currently include:

## Flu Nasal Spray:

- Healthy people ages 2-24, who are not pregnant
- Healthy adults up to age 49 who are health care workers
- Healthy people up to age 49 who care for an infant under the age of 6 months old

## Flu Shots:

- Pregnant women\*
- People 6 months to 24 years old
- People 25–64 years old with underlying health conditions
- Household contacts and caregivers of infants younger than 6 months old
- Health care and emergency medical services personnel

\*Thimerosal-free vaccine may not be available but pregnant women can receive the regular H1N1 flu shot, when available.

As the vaccine becomes more available, and those at high-risk have been vaccinated, it is expected that there will be enough flu shots and nasal spray for everyone to be vaccinated.

## Why are those 65 and older not included in the groups who will get H1N1 vaccine first?

People 65 and older are not contracting H1N1 influenza at the same rate as other age groups. It is thought that older people have a certain level of immunity to this new strain of influenza because about 60 years ago a similar strain may have circulated in the population. This is different than seasonal influenza to which all age groups are vulnerable, especially those under 5 and over 64. We recommend that all people over 6 months of age be vaccinated against seasonal influenza.

## Is the vaccine safe?

The vaccine has been produced in the same way that seasonal influenza vaccine has been made for over 40 years. In clinical trials recently completed, the vaccine was shown to be safe and effective. There are 2 vaccine types: a nasal spray (for healthy non-pregnant persons age 2-49) and an injectable vaccine.

Although there is no evidence that thimerosal (a preservative in vaccine packaged in multi-dose vials) is harmful, a limited number of doses of thimerosal-free vaccine will be available only for pregnant women and children under three. All H1N1 vaccines are made without the use of adjuvants (extenders.)

## What if I am allergic to the vaccine and can't get the H1N1 flu shot?

No single action will provide complete protection, but the risk of infection can be reduced. See "Prevention."

## Will there be a cost for the H1N1 vaccine?

There is no cost for the vaccine itself. Vaccinators may charge an administration fee, however. For those who cannot afford the administration fee, that fee will be waived or the patient will be referred to public health for vaccination.

## Who Should Not Be Vaccinated

There are some people who should not get any flu vaccine without first consulting a physician. These include:

- People who have a severe allergy to chicken eggs.
- People who have had a severe reaction to an influenza vaccination.
- People who developed Guillain-Barré syndrome (GBS) within 6 weeks of getting an influenza vaccine previously. (For information, see General Questions and Answers on Guillain-Barré syndrome (GBS).)
- Children younger than 6 months of age (influenza vaccine is not approved for this age group), and
- People who have a moderate-to-severe illness with a fever (they should wait until they recover to get vaccinated.)

## If I got a seasonal flu nasal spray vaccine, can I get the H1N1 nasal spray?

Yes, but you need to wait a month after the seasonal nasal spray before getting the H1N1 nasal spray. This wait is also necessary if you had a MMR (Measles, Mumps, Rubella) vaccine, or the varicella (chicken pox) vaccine.

## When should I get vaccinated?

Vaccination against 2009 H1N1 should begin as soon as vaccine is available and continue throughout the influenza season, into December, January, and beyond. This is because the timing and duration of flu activity can vary. Flu seasons can last as late as April or May. By early October 2009, extensive 2009 H1N1 flu activity was being reported in the United States. It's possible that there may be waves of 2009 H1N1 activity during the 2009-2010 flu season that hit communities more than once over the course of the season. While 2009 H1N1 viruses are likely to be the most common cause of influenza this season, CDC still expects that seasonal influenza viruses will circulate and continues to recommend that people get a seasonal flu vaccine to protect against seasonal flu viruses.

## Where can I get the H1N1 vaccine?

- Call your health care provider
- Visit the Health District website: [www.srhd.org](http://www.srhd.org)
- Call the Health District Flu Hotline: 324-1495
- Visit the CDC website at: [www.cdc.gov](http://www.cdc.gov)

# What to do if you get sick...

## What should I do if I get sick?

If you get sick with flu-like symptoms this flu season, you should stay home and avoid contact with other people except to get medical care. Most people with 2009 H1N1 have had mild illness and have not needed medical care or antiviral drugs and the same is true of seasonal flu. Mild cases can be safely managed at home.

However, some people are more likely to get flu complications and they should talk to a health care provider about whether they need to be examined if they get flu symptoms this season. They are:

- Children younger than 5, but especially children younger than 2 years old
- People 65 and older
- Pregnant women
- People who have:
  - Cancer
  - Blood disorders (including sickle cell disease)
  - Chronic lung disease [including asthma or chronic obstructive pulmonary disease (COPD)]
  - Diabetes
  - Heart disease
  - Kidney disorders
  - Liver disorders
  - Neurological disorders (including nervous system, brain or spinal cord)
  - Neuromuscular disorders (including muscular dystrophy and multiple sclerosis)
  - Weakened immune systems (including people with AIDS)

Also, it's possible for healthy people to develop severe illness from the flu so anyone concerned about their illness should consult a health care provider.

## When should a person with H1N1 get emergency medical care?

If you or your children become ill and experience any of these warning signs, seek emergency medical care:

### In children:

- Fast breathing or trouble breathing
- Bluish skin color
- Not drinking enough fluids
- Not waking up or not interacting
- Being so irritable that the child does not want to be held
- Flu-like symptoms improve but then return with fever and worse cough
- Fever with a rash

### In adults:

- Difficulty breathing or shortness of breath
- Pain or pressure in the chest or abdomen
- Sudden dizziness
- Confusion
- Severe or persistent vomiting

## Are there medicines to treat H1N1 flu?

Antivirals, which need to be taken in the first 2 days of illness, can prevent serious complications in people with underlying medical conditions, such as asthma, cancer, and diabetes. More research is showing that the use of antivirals in otherwise healthy people only has minimal effect on how long you stay sick with the flu.

Influenza infections can lead to or occur with bacterial infections. Therefore, some people will also need to take antibiotics. More severe or prolonged illness or illness that seems to get better, but then gets worse again may be an indication that a person has a bacterial infection. Check with your health care provider if you have concerns.

Warning! Do not give aspirin (acetylsalicylic acid) to children or teenagers who have the flu; this can cause a rare but serious illness called Reye's syndrome.

- Check ingredient labels on over-the-counter cold and flu medications to see if they contain aspirin.
- Children 5 years of age and older and teenagers with the flu can take medicines without aspirin, such as acetaminophen (Tylenol®) and ibuprofen (Advil®, Motrin®, Nuprin®), to relieve symptoms.
- Children younger than 4 years of age should NOT be given over-the-counter cold medications without first speaking with a health care provider.
- The safest care for flu symptoms in children younger than 2 years of age is using a cool-mist humidifier and a suction bulb to help clear away mucus.
- Fevers and aches can be treated with acetaminophen (Tylenol®) or ibuprofen (Advil®, Motrin®, Nuprin®) or nonsteroidal anti-inflammatory drugs (NSAIDs).

## Additional home care tips:

- Get plenty of rest
- Drink clear fluids (such as water, broth, sports drinks, electrolyte beverages for infants) to keep from being dehydrated
- Isolate the sick person from others as much as possible.
- Stay home for at least 24 hours after fever is gone, except to seek medical care or for other necessities. (Fever should be gone without the use of a fever-reducing medicine.)
- Follow all "Prevention" and "Cleaning" tips on the next page.

# Prevention

## How can you protect your health and the health of those around you

- **Wash your hands often with soap and water**, especially after you cough or sneeze. If soap and water are not available, alcohol-based hand sanitizers are also effective.
- **Cover your nose and mouth with a tissue** when you cough or sneeze. Throw the tissue in the trash after you use it.
- **If you don't have a tissue, cough or sneeze into your sleeve** –NOT your hands.
- **Avoid touching your eyes, nose or mouth** (or someone else's eyes, nose or mouth), where germs can easily enter your body.
- **Try to avoid close contact with sick people.**
- **Stay away from others if you are sick** as much as possible. This means avoiding normal activities, including work, school, travel, shopping, social events, and public gatherings.
- **If you are sick with flu-like illness**, CDC recommends that you stay home for at least 24 hours after your fever is gone (without the use of fever-reducing medicine) except to get medical care or for other necessities.

### Other important actions that you can take are:

- **Follow public health advice** regarding school closures, avoiding crowds and other strategies designed to keep people from coming into contact with sick people.
- **Be prepared in case you get sick and need to stay home** for a week or so; a supply of over-the-counter medicines, alcohol-based hand gel, tissues and other related items will be useful and help avoid trips out in public while you are sick and contagious.

### Should I go to work if my family member is sick?

Employees who are well but who have an ill family member can go to work as usual, but they should monitor their health every day and follow the tips above. If you become ill, notify your supervisor and stay home. Whether you feel sick or not, you should cover your coughs and sneezes because people can be contagious before they have any symptoms.

### What about masks?

The primary use for facemasks in a community setting is to help sick persons avoid spreading their illness to others. There is no convincing scientific evidence that using facemasks or respirators will prevent the wearer from catching H1N1 flu. Also they are generally not recommended for use in community (non-medical) settings. For more information on facemasks and respirators, see <http://www.cdc.gov/h1n1flu/masks.htm>.

# Contamination & Cleaning

## How long can influenza viruses remain on surfaces and objects (such as books and doorknobs)?

Studies have shown that influenza viruses can survive on objects and surfaces, and can infect a person for 2 to 8 hours after being deposited on the surface.

### What kills influenza virus?

Influenza viruses are destroyed by heat (167-212°F [75-100°C]). In addition, several chemicals, including bleach, hydrogen peroxide, detergents (soap), iodophors (iodine-based antiseptics), and alcohols are effective against human influenza viruses if used in proper concentrations for sufficient lengths of time. Always follow the directions on the packaging.

### How should waste disposal be handled to prevent the spread of influenza virus?

To prevent the spread of influenza virus, it is recommended that tissues and other disposable items used by an infected person be thrown in the trash. Additionally, people should wash their hands with soap and water, or use a hand sanitizing gel after touching used tissues and similar waste.

### What household cleaning should be done to prevent the spread of influenza virus?

To prevent the spread of influenza virus it is important to keep surfaces (especially bedside tables, surfaces in the bathroom, kitchen counters and toys for children) clean by wiping them down with a household disinfectant according to directions on the product label.

### How should linens, eating utensils and dishes of persons infected with influenza virus be handled?

Linens, eating utensils, and dishes belonging to those who are sick do not need to be cleaned separately, but importantly these items should not be shared without washing first.

- **Linens** (such as bed sheets and towels) should be washed and dried as usual. People should wash their hands with soap and water or alcohol-based hand rub after handling dirty laundry.
- **Eating utensils** should be washed and dried as usual.