



**August 26, 2009**

## **Seasonal Flu & Pandemic H1N1 Flu Information for Medically Vulnerable Persons: Fall 2009**

### **What is pandemic flu?**

Pandemic influenza (flu) is a world-wide outbreak caused by a new flu virus. The virus spreads easily, and since this is a new flu virus, people have little or no immunity – or protection – against it. In the past, pandemic influenza has caused widespread illness and death.

Pandemic flu is different from seasonal flu. Seasonal flu outbreaks are caused by viruses that have been in communities before. Seasonal flu happens every year, usually during winter months. Pandemic flu is caused by a virus that is new to people. It is likely that pandemic flu will affect more people than seasonal flu because we have little or no immunity against it. Also, a flu pandemic could last longer than a typical flu season.

### **What is the H1N1 flu?**

In April 2009, a new flu virus called novel H1N1 influenza (early on called “swine flu”) started making people ill. The H1N1 flu spread from person-to-person, much the same way that regular seasonal flu viruses spread. Now the new flu virus is called pandemic H1N1.

The symptoms of seasonal flu and pandemic H1N1 flu are similar and include fever, cough, sore throat, runny or stuffy nose, body aches, headache, chills and fatigue. Many people with the pandemic H1N1 flu, especially children, also have diarrhea and vomiting.

### **Why should I be concerned about pandemic H1N1 flu?**

Both seasonal flu and the novel H1N1 flu viruses are expected to cause illness this fall and winter. Flu viruses are known to change as they move through the population. Scientists and health professionals are concerned that this new pandemic H1N1 flu virus could mutate (change) and cause more severe illness and death. Even if this does not happen, we expect there will be large numbers of sick people, which could overwhelm community resources.

Most people who get sick with flu get better without any medical attention. This has been true for people sick with the pandemic H1N1 flu virus. And most people who have been sick with the H1N1 flu have been taken care of at home and have fully recovered. People who have health problems are at higher risk for more severe illness, as are people with weakened immune systems. So far with the pandemic H1N1 flu, it seems that children less than 5 years of age, and especially those less than 2 years, may be at increased risk of more severe illness.

Also, the largest number of confirmed and probable cases has been in people between the ages of 5 and 24 years. This is different when compared to those who usually are sick with seasonal flu. While this age group is getting sick with the H1N1 flu, most recover and get better unless they have health problems or weakened immune systems.

As with seasonal flu, people who have other medical conditions are at higher risk for complications from an infection with the pandemic H1N1 virus. Groups at higher risk for severe illness from pandemic H1N1 virus include:

- Children younger than 5 years old. The risk for severe complications from influenza is highest among children younger than 2 years old.
- Persons with the following conditions:
  - Pregnant women;
  - Chronic pulmonary (including asthma), cardiovascular (except hypertension), renal, hepatic, hematological (including sickle cell disease), or metabolic disorders (including diabetes mellitus), or cancer;

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- Immunosuppression, including that caused by medications or by HIV;
- Persons younger than 19 years of age who are receiving long-term aspirin therapy;
- Any condition (e.g., cognitive dysfunction, spinal cord injuries, seizure disorders, or other neuromuscular disorders) that can compromise breathing or the handling of mucus or that can increase the risk of breathing fluids into the lungs.

### What should I do?

1. Get a seasonal flu vaccine. The seasonal flu vaccine should be available at the beginning of September. Anyone in a high-risk group should be vaccinated. For seasonal flu, high-risk groups include those listed above, and also people age 65 or older, or who live in a nursing home or other chronic care facility. This year, since we will have both flu viruses circulating in our community, it is especially important to get the seasonal flu vaccine and protect yourself and your family members from getting sick with seasonal flu.
2. A vaccine for the pandemic H1N1 flu will be available later in the fall. There may be a limited supply at first, but recommendations for this vaccine include making children and young adults 6 months to 24 years of age, and other members of high-risk groups a first priority for vaccination. The H1N1 vaccine will most likely require a booster shot 2 to 3 weeks after the first shot. For more information on pandemic H1N1 vaccine recommendations, go to <http://www.cdc.gov/h1n1flu/vaccination/acip.htm>
3. If you live with or care for someone who is in a high-risk group, get a seasonal flu vaccine for yourself and everyone else in the household. When the pandemic H1N1 vaccine is available, caregivers should get that vaccine also.
4. There are important things to remember if you or a family member work at or attend a class or program where there are people at high risk of complications from flu. If the person working at or attending the program becomes sick with flu symptoms (fever, cough, sore throat, runny nose), they must **stay home until 7 days after the symptoms started or they no longer have a fever (without taking any medicine) for at least 24 hours, whichever is longer**. This guidance is different than the guidance for children over 5 years of age and for adults who are not working with a high-risk group or attending a class or program with a large number of people in a high-risk group. Children over 5 years of age and adults should stay home until they no longer have a fever (without taking any medicine) for at least 24 hours.
5. To avoid catching the flu, stay away from others who are sick as much as possible.
6. Teach your family good health habits by showing them how to cover their cough and sneeze into their sleeves, or to cover their cough/sneeze with tissues. Everyone should wash their hands often and keep their hands away from their faces. These simple tips will go a long way in limiting the spread of disease.

Not everyone with flu symptoms may need to be seen by a health care provider or be tested for influenza. The best thing to do is to stay at home and rest. People in a high-risk group may want to call their doctor for advice about treatment or preventive medicine. If at any time you are worried that an ill person's symptoms are getting worse, be sure to contact your health care provider.

As we learn more about the pandemic H1N1 flu, information may change. Be sure to watch for other notices, or go to the Public Health Department web site at [www.sccphd.org](http://www.sccphd.org) and look for pandemic H1N1 updates. If you have additional questions, you may call the Public Health Disease Prevention and Control Program at 408-885-3980 and ask to speak with a public health nurse.

Thank you for helping us keep our community as healthy as possible.