

WHY H1N1 FLU IS STILL A CONCERN

As we move into 2010, you may be wondering if the H1N1 flu is still a concern. You probably know that pandemic flu viruses can be unpredictable and have the ability to make otherwise healthy people sick. Keep reading to find out why you shouldn't write off the H1N1 flu virus too soon.

Flu activity is still high

The flu may be leveling off, but it isn't going away. While the number of cases is going down, serious illness and even deaths are still happening. Certain groups, including pregnant women and infants, remain at high risk for serious complications from H1N1 flu. In California, we are still seeing more people sick with the flu than we would normally see at this time of year.

H1N1 is the dominant flu strain

Laboratory testing shows that H1N1 is the main flu virus making people sick around the state. The H1N1 virus has not changed very much, which is good news. That means the H1N1 vaccine is still the best protection against this flu.

Most people are still at risk of getting sick

The California Department of Public Health estimates that 4.3 million Californians have already been infected with H1N1. As of December 22, 2009, 12 million doses of vaccine had been shipped to health care providers in California. That is more than half of what the State is expecting to get. But California's population is over 36 million people, which means that most Californians have not gotten sick or received the vaccine and are still at risk for getting the H1N1 flu. Public Health officials want Californians to get vaccinated and practice good hygiene to protect themselves from the flu.

Riding the pandemic waves

Historically, illnesses caused by pandemic influenza viruses have come in waves. The first wave of illness was in the spring and early summer of 2009. The second wave is declining now. We know it is impossible to predict if or when there will be a third wave. We also know that it is very unlikely that H1N1 will disappear completely.

This slowdown in flu activity and additional shipments of the vaccine means there is an incredible window of opportunity to get vaccinated. Getting a vaccine now will help protect you, prevent the spread of flu to others who are at risk for complications and help reduce the severity of a third wave.

The bottom line

H1N1 Flu cases are dropping off, and more vaccine is arriving. H1N1 is still causing serious illness and even deaths. We don't know what will happen in the next few months. H1N1 is still a concern, but we all have the ability to do something about it now. Public Health officials believe it is still extremely important to get the H1N1 vaccine when it becomes available to you and to practice good hygiene and other healthy habits, which include:

- Staying home and away from others if you are sick until at least 24 hours after your fever is gone, without using fever-reducing medicine.
- Washing your hands often with soap and warm water.
- Covering coughs and sneezes with a tissue or your sleeve.
- Keeping your hands away from your eyes, nose and mouth.
- Staying away from people who are coughing and sneezing.
- Teaching your kids these healthy habits.

