

Pandemic H1N1 Flu Virus

About Pandemic H1N1 Influenza (Flu) Virus

The pandemic H1N1 is a new flu virus that has been spreading throughout the world since the spring of 2009. The word “pandemic” does not tell us how mild or serious the illness from this new flu virus may be, just that there is a worldwide outbreak of a new flu virus that spreads easily from person to person. Since it is a new flu virus, people have little or no immunity (protection) against it.

Pandemic H1N1 and the “Swine Flu”

The pandemic H1N1 flu virus was first called the “swine flu” because laboratory testing showed that many genes in this virus were like flu viruses that normally are found in pigs. More research showed that the H1N1 virus is very different than the normal flu virus in pigs — it has two genes from flu viruses found in pigs, as well as avian (bird) and human genes.

Pandemic H1N1 and Seasonal Flu

Pandemic flu is different from seasonal flu. Seasonal flu is caused by viruses that have been in the community before. Seasonal flu happens every year, usually in winter months, and pandemic flu doesn't happen very often. It is likely that pandemic flu will affect more people because it is a new flu virus and we have little or no immunity against it. Also, a flu pandemic could last longer than a typical flu season.

Pandemic H1N1 is Easily Spread

Like any flu virus, H1N1 is spread when droplets are coughed or sneezed into the air by an infected person. People who are near the infected person (within about 3 feet) can become sick if they breathe these droplets. Flu virus can also spread when a person touches an infected person's droplets. These droplets can be on another person or on a surface like a door handle or tabletop. You can become infected when you touch these droplets, then touch your own eyes, mouth or nose.

Risk Factors for Pandemic H1N1

Most of the pandemic H1N1 flu cases have been in people between the ages of 5 and 24 years old. At this time, there are few cases reported in people older than 64 years of age, which is unusual when compared to who usually gets sick because of seasonal flu.

At this time, pandemic H1N1 flu is typically mild, but it can cause serious illness and death in some people. The groups most at risk for serious illness or complications from the H1N1 flu virus are pregnant women, children under the age of 2 years, as well as people who have health problems and/or have weakened immune systems.

Symptoms of H1N1

The symptoms of pandemic H1N1 in people are like the symptoms of seasonal flu. Symptoms include fever, cough, sore throat, stuffy nose, congestion, body aches, headaches, chills and fatigue. People have also reported diarrhea and vomiting. Health officials recommend that people with flu illness stay home until they no longer have a fever (without taking any medicine) for at least 24 hours.

People working in a hospital or healthcare setting, or in any place where there is a high number of people who are at high risk for serious illness, should stay home longer. For example, people who work in childcare and kids in childcare under the age of 5 years should stay home for at least 7 days after the symptoms begin or until they no longer have a fever for at least 24 hours (without taking medicine), whichever is longer.



Severity of H1N1

Information gathered has shown that the pandemic H1N1 flu is currently no more severe than seasonal flu. While most cases are mild and most people recover without medical treatment, hospitalizations continue as the pandemic H1N1 flu virus remains in our community. Public Health officials will continue to monitor the H1N1 virus to see whether or not it mutates (changes) as many flu viruses do. If that happens, this flu virus could become more dangerous and cause more illness and deaths. Even if this does not happen, it is likely that large numbers of people will get sick and could potentially overwhelm community resources.

It is important to remember that flu is a serious illness, so stay informed and take common sense actions to protect your health. We are dealing with a pandemic of a new flu virus against which people have little or no immunity.

The H1N1 Vaccine

The federal government is working with vaccine manufacturers to produce a safe vaccine against H1N1. Assuming tests go well, there should be enough vaccine, but early shipments will be limited. It will be important to first get the vaccine to those who are at highest risk for illness or serious complications because of H1N1. This includes children from the age of 6 months old to young adults to the age of 24 years old, especially children under the age of 2 years, pregnant women, and people who have health problems and/or have weakened immune systems. Healthcare and emergency workers will also be some of the first people to get the vaccine because of their role in caring for those who are sick or injured, and in protecting our community.

Related Travel Restrictions

At this time there are no travel restrictions for the pandemic H1N1 virus, but airport staff in some countries are checking the health of arriving passengers. Many countries, including Japan and China, are screening arriving passengers for flu-like illness. The Centers for Disease Control and Prevention recommends the following:

- If you are sick with symptoms of flu-like illness, you should not travel. These symptoms include fever, cough, sore throat, runny or stuffy nose, body aches, headache, chills and fatigue.
- Contact the embassy of the country or countries in your travel itinerary for information about entry screening procedures and other questions you may have. Note: the United States usually cannot interfere with the rights of other countries to screen airline passengers coming to their countries or influence the number of days a passenger may be placed in quarantine.

The CDC strongly recommends that travelers consider purchasing travel insurance.

For More Information

- To learn about the common sense actions you can take to prevent the spread of flu and other illnesses, go to www.sccphd.org/panflu to find more information about H1N1 prevention and preparedness.
- For information on the pandemic H1N1 virus, as well as more international travel information, go to www.cdc.gov/h1n1flu
- For advice on talking to children about the new flu virus H1N1, parents and caregivers can visit www.cdc.gov/h1n1flu/talkingtokids.htm