

What you need to know about novel H1N1 flu

What is H1N1?

Novel H1N1 influenza is a respiratory illness caused by a virus. Last April, this entirely new (novel) strain of flu arrived in the United States and quickly became widespread, making many people sick. It also spread quickly around the world. By early June, the World Health Organization declared the first global influenza pandemic in over 40 years.

What is happening with H1N1 now? What do we know about it?

While the disease appears to be waning in Minnesota and in other parts of the U.S., it is still very much with us. It is making lots of people sick in the southern hemisphere now. So far, for most people, the illnesses caused by H1N1 have been relatively mild. Unlike regular, seasonal influenza, this flu seems to affect more young adults and children than the elderly. Others most at risk for severe illness from this flu appear to be pregnant women and people with underlying medical conditions such as asthma or diabetes.

What is likely to happen with H1N1 in the future?

Influenza is a very unpredictable virus because it changes relatively rapidly. This new influenza could just go away in the fall. It could stay around, but continue to behave like regular, "seasonal" flu. The virus may also change enough so that it begins to cause more severe illness, like the deadly pandemic strain that swept around the world in 1918.

Most scientists now expect that we will see a second wave of H1N1 with more illnesses in the fall. But we don't know whether it will be more severe, like the strain of 1918, or not. If it is, the result could be widespread illness, many

deaths and extensive social disruption. Even if it does not become more severe, if novel H1N1 influenza causes illness at the same time as seasonal influenza, the health care system could be overwhelmed. If the novel H1N1 influenza becomes more severe, then normal everyday activities could also be severely disrupted. There may be restrictions on travel and public gatherings. People may be asked to stay home from work or school for a period of time, even if they are not ill. To face such challenges, we all need to be prepared – and we need to be preparing now.

How can I prepare for it?

Make a plan: Plan what you will do if you or others in your family become ill or if schools or workplaces close for an extended time. This includes keeping important medical and emergency information handy and updated.

Make an emergency kit: Fill boxes or plastic bins with everything you need to stay home for two weeks. For a list of things to put in such a kit and to learn more about preparing for a pandemic, visit the Minnesota Department of Health (MDH) Web site and search for "Individual and Family Preparedness."

Will there be a vaccine against novel H1N1?

National and international health authorities are working urgently with vaccine manufacturers to develop and produce H1N1 vaccine. While they are close to having one or more vaccines ready, they must go through clinical trials to make sure they are safe. The federal government estimates that a vaccine will be ready sometime in October or November.

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Who should get the H1N1 vaccine?

Once a vaccine is ready, there may not be enough of it at first for everyone who wants it. In that case, it will be important for those who are most at risk for severe illness or who would most likely spread influenza to others to receive vaccine. Those would include pregnant women, people who live with or care for children under 6 months of age, children and young adults, health care and emergency services personnel and people who have underlying health conditions. Recommendations may change as more information becomes available about H1N1 and vaccine. At this point in time, we think it is likely that two doses of the novel H1N1 vaccine will be recommended. For more details on novel H1N1 vaccine, visit the MDH or CDC Web sites.

Should I get the seasonal flu shot?

Will the seasonal flu vaccine also protect against novel H1N1?

The usual seasonal influenza viruses are still expected to cause illness this fall and winter. We expect the seasonal vaccine to be available earlier than the novel H1N1 vaccine. Because seasonal influenza can be a serious disease, we encourage individuals to get their seasonal flu vaccine as soon as it is available. The seasonal flu vaccine is not expected to protect against the novel H1N1 flu.

How can I help prevent the spread of H1N1?

Like other influenza, H1N1 spreads when a person with flu coughs or sneezes or by touching something with flu viruses on it and then touching your eyes, nose or mouth. There are some simple, important things you can do to protect yourself and those around you:

- Cover your nose and mouth with a tissue every time you cough or sneeze. Throw the used tissue in the waste basket.

- If you don't have a tissue, sneeze or cough into your sleeve.
- Clean your hands often with soap and water or an alcohol-based hand cleaner.
- Avoid touching your eyes, nose or mouth.
- Avoid close contact with people who are sick, if possible.
- Stay healthy: eat nutritious foods, get enough sleep, and exercise.

How will I know if I have H1N1?

The symptoms are similar to seasonal flu:

- fever (above 100°F)
- cough
- sore throat
- stuffy nose
- in some cases people have also experienced diarrhea and vomiting, body aches and headaches

What should I do if I get it?

If you become ill with influenza-like symptoms, you should:

- **Call** your health care provider to determine if you need to be evaluated.
- **Stay home and avoid contact with other people as much as possible to keep from spreading your illness to others.**

Can antivirals be used to treat H1N1?

Antiviral drugs are prescription medicines (pills, liquid or an inhaled medicine) that fight against the flu by keeping flu viruses from reproducing in your body. If you get sick, antiviral drugs can make your illness milder and make you feel better faster. They may also prevent serious flu complications. This fall, antivirals may be prioritized for persons with severe illness or those at higher risk for flu complications.

For more information:

www.health.state.mn.us or www.cdc.gov