

Pandemic H1N1 Frequently Asked Questions

Oregon Public Health Division

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What is pandemic H1N1 flu?

Pandemic H1N1 influenza (once referred to as “swine flu”) is a new flu virus that causes respiratory illness in people. The Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) first detected this virus in the U.S. in April 2009. In June 2009, the World Health Organization (WHO) declared that an H1N1 pandemic is underway, which means this infectious disease is spreading among people throughout the world.

How do you get pandemic H1N1 flu?

The pandemic H1N1 virus spreads the same way seasonal influenza viruses spread—mainly from person to person through coughing and sneezing by people with the flu. Sometimes people may become infected by touching something with flu virus on it and then touching their mouth or nose.

What can I do to avoid getting or spreading the pandemic H1N1 flu?

- Protect yourself by getting vaccinated with a seasonal flu shot or nasal mist. Once the pandemic H1N1 influenza vaccine is available, you will need an additional flu shot and possibly a booster about a month later.
- Prevent the spread of germs by following these three effective, everyday steps:
 - Cover your nose and mouth with a tissue when you cough or sneeze. Throw the tissue in the trash after you use it.
 - Wash your hands often with soap and water, especially after you cough or sneeze. Alcohol-based hand cleaners are also effective.
 - Stay home if you get sick. Remain at home until you’re free from fever (a measurable temperature of 100 degrees F or higher) for at least 24-hours.
- As flu season progresses, follow the advice of your local public health department regarding measures to reduce flu transmission in your community.

What are the signs and symptoms of pandemic H1N1 flu?

Pandemic H1N1 flu symptoms are similar to the symptoms of seasonal flu and include fever, cough, sore throat, body aches, runny or stuffy nose, headache, nausea, chills and fatigue. Some people have reported diarrhea and vomiting due to pandemic H1N1 flu.

Is pandemic H1N1 influenza worse than the usual influenza?

Pandemic H1N1 has been similar in severity to usual strains of influenza. However, since few people have immunity to the new virus, more people may get sick and this may lead to an increased number of hospitalizations and deaths.

How long can an infected person spread this virus to others?

People infected with either pandemic H1N1 or seasonal flu shed virus and may be able to infect others from one day before getting sick until five to seven days after. If you get sick, remember to stay home—and keep sick children home—until free from fever for 24 hours.

What should I do if I get sick?

If you become ill with influenza-type symptoms, you should stay home and avoid contact with other people. Staying at home means you should not leave the building except to seek medical care. Avoid normal activities including work, school, travel, shopping, and social and public gatherings. Stay home for at least 24 hours after your fever subsides. While at home, get plenty of rest, drink clear liquids, cover your coughs and sneezes, and watch for emergency warning signs (see below) that might indicate you need medical attention.

When should I see a doctor for pandemic H1N1 flu?

If you have severe illness or you are at high risk for flu complications, call your health care provider, who will determine whether flu testing or treatment is needed.

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

In children, emergency warning signs that need urgent medical attention include:

- Fast breathing or trouble breathing
- Bluish or gray skin color
- Not drinking enough fluids
- Severe or persistent vomiting
- Not waking up or not interacting
- A child who is so irritable that he/she does not want to be held
- Flu-like symptoms improve but then return with fever and worse cough
- Fever with a rash

In adults, emergency warning signs that need urgent medical attention include

- Difficulty breathing or shortness of breath
- Pain or pressure in the chest or abdomen
- Sudden dizziness
- Confusion
- Severe or persistent vomiting
- Flu-like symptoms improve but then return with fever and cough

What if I'm ill and don't have a health care provider or insurance?

If you have a severe illness such as sustained high fever or difficulty breathing, or you believe that you require immediate medical attention, call 911 or go to your nearest emergency department. If you feel you need to see a doctor regarding your flu symptoms, but don't have health insurance or a regular doctor, call 1-800-SAFENET (723-3638) for referral to a nearby, low-cost clinic.

How do I care for someone who is ill with pandemic H1N1 flu?

The CDC recommends these guidelines:

- First, check with the health care provider about any special care the person may need for certain health conditions such as pregnancy, diabetes, heart disease, asthma or emphysema—and to determine if the ill person should take antiviral medication.
- Treat the flu sufferer with over-the-counter pain and fever relievers such as acetaminophen or ibuprofen, but NEVER give aspirin to children or teenagers. This can cause a serious illness called Reye's Syndrome.
- Do not give children younger than four years of age over-the-counter cold medications without first checking with their health care provider.
- Avoid being face-to-face with the sick person and try to provide good ventilation.
- Wash your hands after touching the sick person and keep surfaces clean.
- Keep the ill person at home but away from others in the house as much as possible, as least until fever is absent for 24 hours.
- Make sure the sick person drinks plenty of liquids.

Why is it important for someone with the flu to drink liquids?

The flu virus causes the body to lose water through fever and sweating. Signs of dehydration include weakness, fainting, dry mouth, dark concentrated urine, low blood pressure or a fast pulse when standing or sitting down. To prevent dehydration, it's very important for a person with the flu to drink a lot of water—up to 12 glasses a day.

What about the use of antiviral drugs to treat pandemic H1N1?

Antiviral drugs, such as Tamiflu® and Relenza®, are prescription medicines that fight against the flu by preventing flu viruses from reproducing in your body. If you get sick, taking antiviral drugs within 48 hours of first developing symptoms can lessen the severity of the illness. Antiviral drugs may also prevent serious flu complications. It's important to remember that antivirals are not a "silver bullet." It is impractical to take antivirals to prevent getting the flu because you'd have to take them constantly and they are expensive. Also, the misuse of antivirals can lead to the development of flu viruses that can't be treated.

Does Oregon have antiviral medicines?

The State of Oregon has purchased antiviral medicine and Federal stockpiles are available if necessary. This fall, antivirals may be prioritized for individuals with severe illness or those at higher risk for flu complications.

Should I get a regular seasonal flu shot?

Yes. Every year in the United States, on average, five to 20 percent of the population gets the flu. More than 200,000 people are hospitalized and about 36,000 die from seasonal flu-related causes. The seasonal flu vaccine will not protect against pandemic H1N1 flu, but it will reduce your chances of getting the seasonal flu and help to keep you healthy.

Will vaccine be available to protect against pandemic H1N1?

Vaccine is being produced to protect against pandemic H1N1, and is expected to be available this fall. According to the CDC, the exact timeline for vaccine development can vary, but they are making every effort to have the vaccine available as soon as mid-October. The vaccine will be a shot, probably requiring a booster about a month later.

Who should get a pandemic H1N1 flu shot?

According to the CDC, the pandemic H1N1 vaccine will first be available to the following five priority groups:

- Children and young adults from 6 months to 24 years.
- Pregnant women
- Health care workers and emergency medical responders
- People caring for infants under 6 months of age
- People aged 25-64 with underlying medical conditions (such as asthma, immune-deficiencies, etc.).

Will schools close because of pandemic H1N1 flu?

School closures will be handled on a local level. Parents are encouraged to learn their schools' policies on illnesses and being absent. Remember to keep your sick children at home until they are fever-free for at least 24 hours. It is unlikely that schools will close because of pandemic H1N1, but just in case, make a plan for taking care of your children if schools are not open for long periods.

What should I expect this fall and winter?

Illness from pandemic H1N1 flu in spring and summer 2009 was similar to seasonal flu. But people have no existing immunity to the new pandemic H1N1 strain so more people are expected to become ill. It is also possible that the virus will change in the coming months and become more dangerous. Health authorities believe that in either case, it is likely that we will have a serious outbreak caused by the new flu strain this fall.

What will happen if there is a serious pandemic H1N1 outbreak?

If large numbers of people become ill, our communities may be challenged:

- It may be difficult to get medical care if large numbers of people overwhelm hospitals and clinics, which may also be short-staffed if doctors and nurses become ill.
- Supplies and services may be limited. Many people could be unable to work, affecting how long businesses, banks, government offices and other services are open.
- Medicines for flu symptoms may be in short supply.
- Travel may be difficult. Transit schedules may change or be restricted; gas could be in short supply.
- If the severity of the illness increases, you may be asked to stay away from others. Staying home could help stop the spread of the virus. Events may be canceled, and theaters and schools closed. However, these actions are NOT anticipated, based on current knowledge of the illness.

- This flu pandemic could last a long time. The 1918 flu pandemic lasted 18 months. In some cases, pandemics weaken for awhile and then recur.
- Health officials will keep you informed. This website will have updated information.

How should I prepare for a major flu outbreak in my community?

There are many things you can do right now to prepare for a major pandemic H1N1 outbreak in your community:

- Know policies. Ask your employer or union about policies concerning sick leave, absences, time off and telecommuting. Know your schools' policies on illnesses and being absent. Remember that you shouldn't return to school or work until you are fever-free for 24 hours.
- Plan. Make a work plan for ensuring essential duties can be completed if large numbers of employees are absent over many months. Make household and emergency plans such as deciding who will care for children if schools close and how you will care for family members with disabilities if social services are limited. Be prepared to get by for at least a week on what you have at home—stores may close or have limited supplies.
- Keep these items in your home:
 - Enough food and water per person to last a week or more.
 - Medications, at least a week's supply of the medicines you take regularly.
 - Items to relieve flu symptoms such as cold packs, blankets, humidifiers, and fever and pain reducers like acetaminophen and ibuprofen. Never give aspirin to children or teens; it can cause a serious disease called Reye's syndrome.
 - Personal items. Store at least a week's supply of soap, shampoo, toothpaste, toilet paper and cleaning products.
 - Activities for you and your children including books, crafts, board games and art supplies.
 - Cash. Banks may not always be open.
 - Pet supplies: food, water and litter.
 - Cell phone or landline phone with a cord.
 - Large trash bags—garbage service may be disrupted.
- Protect your health by getting a seasonal flu vaccine, the H1N1 vaccine when it becomes available, and not smoking.

How many people have the flu right now?

It is not possible to say exactly how many people have or have had the pandemic H1N1 flu at any given time, because not everyone who becomes ill with the flu is tested. In the United States, only hospitalized cases of pandemic H1N1 influenza are currently being reported. An updated case count of hospitalizations in the United States due to confirmed pandemic H1N1 flu is available at: <http://www.cdc.gov/h1n1flu/update.htm>

Can I get pandemic H1N1 from eating pork?

No. You cannot get pandemic H1N1 from eating pork or pork products. Eating properly handled and cooked pork products is safe.

Are there guidelines for child care providers?

Guidance for child care providers is available at the Oregon State Health Division H1N1 flu Web site at www.flu.oregon.gov. Additional information is also available at <http://www.cdc.gov/h1n1flu/schools/>

Are there travel restrictions in place?

The CDC has the latest travel information relating to pandemic H1N1:

<http://www.cdc.gov/travel/content/novel-h1n1-flu.aspx>

Where can health care providers go for more pandemic H1N1 information?

For guidance on pandemic H1N1 influenza laboratory testing, and the use of antiviral medication: <http://www.oregon.gov/DHS/ph/acd/flu/provider-testing.pdf>

For Oregon Public Health Division guidance for infection control for care of patients with pandemic H1N1 influenza: <http://www.flu.oregon.gov>

For CDC guidance on pandemic H1N1 influenza antiviral recommendations:

<http://www.cdc.gov/h1n1flu/recommendations.htm>

For CDC guidance on pandemic H1N1 specimen collection:

<http://www.cdc.gov/h1n1flu/specimencollection.htm>