



What is influenza?

Influenza, or the “flu,” is an infectious virus that is transmitted through the air by people coughing or sneezing. The most common symptoms of the flu are chills, fever, sore throat, muscle pains, severe headache, coughing, weakness and general discomfort. Severe illness with the flu can cause pneumonia and or death. Because the flu is most common from November to March, it is also called the “seasonal flu.”

How is H1N1 flu (swine flu) different from the seasonal flu?

The H1N1 flu virus is a type of flu that spreads in the same way as the seasonal flu, but the H1N1 flu is caused by another type of flu virus. It generally has the same symptoms and serious health risks.

Why was the H1N1 flu called the swine flu?

The H1N1 flu was originally called the swine flu because initial laboratory tests showed that the virus was similar to a flu virus that occurs in pigs. There is no risk of getting the H1N1 virus from eating pork or pork products.

How can I reduce the risk of getting and spreading the flu?

You can reduce your risk of getting and spreading the flu by covering your mouth with disposable tissue when coughing or sneezing, staying at least three feet away from people who have the flu, washing your hands frequently, and getting plenty of rest. Be sure to keep a supply of food and medication on hand, so if you do get sick, you can stay home and rest away from other people.

What is the flu shot?

The flu shot is a vaccine that can be used every year to help reduce your risk of getting the seasonal flu. It is given as an injection, usually in the upper arm. Flu shots should not be used in people who have ever had a serious allergic reaction to eggs. Because the seasonal flu shot is not effective for the H1N1 flu, a separate vaccination is needed for protection against the H1N1 flu.

Is there a flu shot for the H1N1 flu?

Yes. A vaccine for the H1N1 virus will be available in October 2009. It is different than the seasonal flu vaccine.

Who should get the flu shot for the seasonal flu?

While most people can benefit from the flu shot, the CDC recommends that higher risk individuals be given priority for getting the flu shot for the seasonal flu. Specifically, the CDC recommends the flu shot for:

- all children from 6 months through 18 years of age and anyone 50 years of age or older
- women who will be pregnant during the flu season
- anyone with long-term health problems (eg. asthma, reactive airway disease, diabetes or other chronic health conditions)
- anyone with a weakened immune system from (eg. HIV/AIDS, long-term steroid use, some cancer treatments or organ transplants)
- residents of nursing homes and other chronic-care facilities
- people who live with or care for people at high risk for complications from the flu (eg. healthcare workers, caregivers of children, etc)

Who should get the flu shot for the H1N1 flu?

The CDC recommends that the following groups receive the H1N1 flu vaccine initially:

- pregnant women
- caregivers of children younger than 6 months of age (e.g. parents, siblings, and daycare providers)
- health care and emergency medical services personnel
- all people from 6 months through 24 years of age
- all people 25 years of age through 64 years of age who have medical conditions associated with a higher risk of flu complications

After these groups have been vaccinated, the CDC recommends all people younger than 65 years old be vaccinated. The risk of infection for people over 65 seems to be less, so the CDC only recommends that seniors are offered vaccination once the needs of the younger age groups have been met.

When can I get seasonal flu shots?

You can get the flu shot as soon as vaccines are available (usually in early fall) and anytime throughout the flu season, into December, January and beyond.

Are there other vaccine options besides the seasonal flu shot?

Yes. FluMist[®] is a vaccine, where the medication is delivered into your nose as a nasal mist. Flumist is only an option in healthy individuals, ages two to 49 years and for women who are not pregnant. For more information go to www.cdc.gov/flu/protect/keyfacts.htm.

Are there medication options for once I have seasonal flu or the H1N1 flu?

Yes. The antiviral medications Relenza[®] and Tamiflu[®] may be used for both the seasonal flu and the H1N1 flu. They have been found to decrease the number of days that a person has the symptoms of the seasonal flu by a day or two and may decrease the severity of symptoms in some people. It is unclear how effective these medications are for the H1N1 flu.

How do I use Relenza and Tamiflu to help with the flu?

- These medications may help lessen the symptoms of the flu once you already have the flu.
- Once symptoms start, these medications need to be used within 24 hours to be helpful.
- If these medications are taken without symptoms, a resistance can be built up and they will not work when they are really needed. Last flu season, several strains of the seasonal flu were already resistant to these medications, so it is very important that they are used only when necessary.
- Flu viruses have not been shown to develop a resistance to the flu shot.

How do I know if the flu shot, FluMist, the H1N1 flu shot or Relenza and Tamiflu are covered?

If you have questions about coverage, call the telephone number on the back of your member ID card and ask your customer service representative.

THE BOTTOM LINE

For the common flu, the flu shot continues to provide a great way to help prevent the flu. Younger people, especially those who are at risk for complications from the H1N1 virus, should consider getting the H1N1 vaccine.

Note: Since many medication options are available, our physicians and pharmacists developed this to provide you with information about the available alternatives, as well as potential advantages and lack of advantages of the various products. This medication summary was developed based upon an evaluation of information from the US Food and Drug Administration (FDA), scientific studies, and input from practicing doctors and specialists.



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