Seasonal and 2009 H1N1 Flu: A Guide for Parents

Flu information

What is the flu?

The flu (influenza) is an infection of the nose, throat, and lungs caused by flu viruses. Flu viruses cause illness, hospital stays and deaths in the United States each year. There are many different flu viruses and sometimes a new flu virus starts spreading among people and making people sick.

What is 2009 H1N1 flu?

2009 H1N1 flu (sometimes called swine flu or novel flu) is a new and very different flu virus that is spreading worldwide among people. This flu season, scientists expect both 2009 H1N1 flu and seasonal flu to cause more people to get sick than a regular flu season. More hospital stays and deaths may also occur.

How serious is the flu?

Most people with 2009 H1N1 have had mild illness and have not needed medical care and the same is true of seasonal flu. However, the flu can be serious, especially for young children (risk is highest in children younger than 2 years) and children of any age who have certain chronic medical conditions. These conditions include asthma or other lung problems, diabetes, weakened immune systems, kidney disease, heart problems and neurological and neuromuscular disorders. Children with these conditions can have more severe illness from any flu, including from the 2009 H1N1 flu virus.

How does flu spread?

Both 2009 H1N1 flu and seasonal flu are thought to spread mostly from person to person through the coughs and sneezes of people who are sick with flu. People also may get sick by touching something with flu viruses on it and then touching their mouth, nose or eyes.

What are the symptoms of the flu?

Symptoms of seasonal flu and 2009 H1N1 flu can include fever, cough, sore throat, runny or stuffy nose, body aches, headache, chills, fatigue and sometimes vomiting and diarrhea. Some people sick with the flu will not have a fever.

How long can a sick person spread the flu to others?

People infected with seasonal and 2009 H1N1 flu shed virus and may be able to infect others from 1 day before getting sick to 5 to 7 days after. However, some people can shed virus for longer, especially children and people with weakened immune systems and people infected with 2009 H1N1 flu.

Protect your child

How can I protect my child against flu?

Get a seasonal flu vaccine for yourself and your child to protect against seasonal flu viruses.

Get a 2009 H1N1 vaccine for your child. Ask your doctor about whether you should get one too.

Take – and encourage your child to take – everyday steps that can help prevent the spread of germs. This includes:

- Cover coughs and sneezes with a tissue. Throw the tissue in the trash after you use it.
- Stay away from people who are sick.
- Wash hands often with soap and water. If soap and water are not available, use an alcohol-based hand rub.
- Avoid touching your eyes, nose and mouth. Germs spread this way.
- If someone in the household is sick, try to keep the sick person in a separate room from others in the household, if possible.
- Keep surfaces like bedside tables, surfaces in the bathroom, kitchen counters and toys for children clean by wiping them down with a household disinfectant according to directions on the product label.
- Throw away tissues and other disposable items used by sick persons in your household in the trash.

Is there a vaccine to protect my child from H1N1 flu?

A yearly seasonal flu vaccine is the first and most important step in protecting against seasonal flu. This vaccine is recommended for children 6 months through 18 years of age and all people who are close contacts (caregivers) of children younger than 5 years of age.

A vaccine against 2009 H1N1 flu also is being made. This vaccine is recommended for all children and young adults 6 months through 24 years of age. Other people, including close contacts of children younger than 6 months of age and adults with certain chronic medical conditions, are recommended for vaccination too. More information about the 2009 H1N1 flu vaccine and the seasonal flu vaccine is available on the CDC Web site.

Is there medicine to treat the flu?

Antiviral drugs can treat both seasonal flu and 2009 H1N1 flu. The priority use for these drugs this season is to treat people who are seriously ill (hospitalized) or people who are sick with the flu and either have a medical condition or are in an age group that puts them at high risk of serious flu complications. Antiviral drugs can make people feel better and get better sooner and may prevent serious flu complications. These drugs need to be prescribed by a doctor and they work best when started during the first 2 days of illness. These drugs can be given to children.

What should I use for hand cleaning?

Washing hands with soap and running water (for as long as it takes to sing the "Happy Birthday" song twice) will help protect against many germs. If soap and water are not available, use an alcohol-based hand rub.

If your child is sick

What can I do if my child gets sick?

If your child is 5 years or older and otherwise healthy and gets flu-like symptoms, including a fever and/or cough, consult your doctor as needed and make sure your child gets plenty of rest and drinks enough fluids.

If your child is younger than 5 (and especially younger than 2) or of any age and has a medical condition like asthma, diabetes, or a neurologic problem and develops flu-like symptoms, ask a doctor if your child should be examined. This is because younger children (especially children younger than 2) and children who have chronic medical conditions may be at higher risk of serious complications from flu infection, including 2009 H1N1 flu. Talk to your doctor early if you are worried about your child's illness.

What if my child seems very sick?

Even children who have always been healthy before or had the flu before can get a severe case of flu.

Call or take your child to a doctor right away if your child of any age has:

- Fast breathing or trouble breathing
- Bluish or gray skin color
- Not drinking enough fluids
- Severe or persistent vomiting
- Not waking up or not interacting
- Being so irritable that the child does not want to be held
- Flu-like symptoms improve but then return with fever and worse cough
- Has other conditions (like heart or lung disease, diabetes, or asthma) and develops flu symptoms, including a fever and/or cough.

Can my child go to school, day care or camp if he or she is sick?

No. Your child should stay home to rest and to avoid giving the flu to other children.

When can my child go back to school after having the flu?

Keep your child home from school, day care or camp for at least 24 hours after their fever is gone. (Fever should be gone without the use of a fever-reducing medicine.) A fever is defined as 100°F or 37.8°C.

For more information, visit www.cdc.gov or www.flu.gov or call 800-CDC-INFO