

Frequently Asked Questions

Pandemic and Seasonal Flu



Get Ready

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Pandemic and Seasonal Flu

What is pandemic flu?

A pandemic of influenza, or flu, occurs when a new or uncommon type of flu virus that is easily transmitted from person to person spreads rapidly around the world. The virus can cause serious illness or death. These events can overwhelm health systems around the world and disrupt business, cause schools to close and other life disruptions.

How is pandemic flu different from the seasonal flu we see every year?

In cases of seasonal or annual flu, unlike pandemic flu, our bodies have some protection against the types of flu that go around each year. This is because our bodies have been exposed to these common flu strains before and have had time to develop some protection against them. This protection is also improved by the flu shots we get every year to keep us from getting sick.

But that doesn't mean that the annual flu is not a serious health threat. Each year, more than 200,000 people in the U.S. have to go to the hospital because of the flu, and 36,000 people die from it in the U.S. However, a pandemic flu outbreak could send millions to the hospital and kill hundreds of thousands if our bodies have not had the time to develop protection against it.

The annual flu is also more likely during cold weather; people typically get it October to May. However, pandemic flu can happen at any time of year and often comes in two to three waves over a couple of years.

What is H1N1?

H1N1 is a new type of virus that was first detected in early 2009. Symptoms include the same things you might experience with the flu you get in the winter: fever, cough, fatigue, headache, chills, body aches, sore throat, diarrhea and vomiting. It is possible that very severe cases of H1N1 can lead to pneumonia and death, especially in people who are already in poor health.

What does H1N1 mean?

When a new flu virus is discovered, it is named using an "H" and "N"—abbreviations for the two proteins (hemagglutinin and neuraminidase) that make up a flu virus. Some combinations of "H" and "N" cause serious illness and even death, while others cause only very mild symptoms in animals and in people.

How can I reduce my risk of getting seasonal flu or pandemic flu?

The best way to protect yourself from the common flu that goes around each year is to get a flu shot. The H1N1 vaccine started becoming available October 2009. In addition, following these simple steps can reduce your risk of getting the flu, regardless of whether it's pandemic or seasonal:

- Wash your hands often, long enough and with warm water and soap. Wash your hands for as long as it takes to sing "Happy Birthday" all the way through twice (about 20 seconds).
- Stay home from work or school when you are sick. Because you can infect others early on, you should stay home as soon as you come down with any flu-like symptom.
- Cover your mouth and nose when you sneeze and cough.
- Avoid touching your eyes, nose or mouth.
- Avoid close contact with people who are sick from a respiratory illness. If you have a respiratory illness, keep this in mind to protect the people you live and work with from getting sick.

Does the flu shot I get every year protect me from pandemic flu?

No; it does not. The vaccine only protects you against the types of flu that have been spread in the U.S. and around the world before and have gotten people sick.

Should I take this seriously?

Yes. You should be planning ahead so you and your family are prepared. There have been three flu pandemics in the last 100 years. Preparing for pandemic flu is very similar to planning for a disaster such as a hurricane, tornado or other disaster. You should ask yourself the following questions:

- What should you do if your children's school or childcare center closes because of an emergency condition?
- What would you do if grocery stores and pharmacies closed? Do you have enough food and water at home? What about your medications and other supplies?
- If a flu pandemic or disaster strikes, how will you care for family members at home, including those with serious or long-term illnesses?
- Would you be able to use sick leave or work from home if there were an emergency?
- Does your workplace have a plan for how to respond if a flu pandemic or other disaster strikes and do you know what that plan is?

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How do you get H1N1 flu?

H1N1 flu can be spread from person to person, especially through coughing or sneezing. You can also catch it from touching things that have the virus on it. In this outbreak, we don't know how quickly H1N1 flu can be spread, so it's important to take steps to protect yourself. While the virus is also known as "swine flu," you cannot get H1N1 flu from eating pork.

How do you prevent H1N1 flu?

There are very simple ways to protect yourself from H1N1 flu. Get the vaccine. Wash your hands frequently, especially when you are in public places. Stay at least three feet away from anyone who is coughing or sneezing. If someone around you appears sick, avoid touching your eyes, nose and mouth and any surfaces the sick person touches, until you have a chance to wash your hands. If you start to feel sick, stay home from work and don't go to public places. Then call your health care provider right away to find out if you are at risk for H1N1 flu infection.

If you are living with someone who is experiencing flu symptoms, it's important to protect yourself. Until you know for sure whether the person has H1N1 flu, care for yourself by wearing a mask or a protective cloth over your mouth and nose. Wash your hands frequently and don't share dishes, towels or bed sheets with the sick person. As soon as possible, contact your doctor to find out if either of you is at risk for H1N1 flu.

What do I do if I get H1N1 flu?

If you start to feel even some of the symptoms of H1N1 flu — fever, cough, fatigue, headache, chills, body aches, sore throat, diarrhea and vomiting — stay home from work or school and out of public places. Limit contact with other people in your home to avoid getting them sick. Make sure to cover your mouth and nose when you sneeze and throw tissues directly into a garbage can and not on other surfaces where the virus can stay. Clean your hands often with soap and water. Contact your health care provider right away to find out if you are at risk of infection for H1N1 flu. Two antiviral medications, Tamiflu and Relenza, are effective in reducing the severity of flu symptoms.

Serious symptoms

The Centers for Disease Control and Prevention recommends that you go immediately to your doctor or local emergency room if you or your children experience any of the following serious symptoms:

Serious symptoms in children:

- Trouble breathing (for example, fast breathing or gasping for air)
- Severe or persistent vomiting
- Bluish skin color
- Not wanting to drink fluids
- Not waking up or being unusually tired
- A child not wanting to be held or touched
- Flu-like symptoms that get better, but then come back with fever and severe cough
- Any fever with a rash

Serious symptoms in adults:

- Trouble breathing (for example, fast breathing or gasping for air)
- Pain or pressure in the chest or abdomen
- Dizziness
- Confusion
- Severe or non-stop vomiting
- Flu-like symptoms that get better, but then come back with fever and severe cough

Above all, do not panic. Stay calm, take the preventive steps listed above and seek treatment as soon as possible if you feel sick. These are the keys to protecting yourself and your loved ones from H1N1 flu.

Where can I get more information?

For more information, go to www.cdc.gov/H1N1flu or www.flu.gov