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## Frequently Asked Questions about Seasonal Flu and H1N1 (Swine) Flu

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## COLDS VERSUS FLU

### What is the difference between a cold and the flu?

The flu and the common cold are both respiratory illnesses but they are caused by different viruses. In general, the flu is worse than the common cold, and symptoms such as fever, body aches, extreme tiredness and dry cough are more common and intense with the flu. Colds tend to develop gradually, while the flu tends to start very suddenly. People with colds are more likely to have a runny or stuffy nose.

| <b>Important Differences Between Colds and the Flu</b> |   |
|--|---|
| <b>WITH A COLD:</b>                                    | <b>WITH THE FLU:</b>  |
| You almost never have a fever.                         | You have a fever.   |
| You feel stuffiness in your head.                      | Your entire body feels sick.  |
| You feel a little sick.                                | You feel very sick.   |
| You can have a cold any time of year.                  | Seasonal flu starts in early winter and continuing through early spring. Flu pandemics happen every 30 years or so, and don't have a particular season. |
| There is no shot to protect you.                       | You can get a shot to protect yourself.   |
| There are no prescription medicines to treat colds.    | There are prescription medicines to treat the flu.  |

### Can anti-flu drugs treat the common cold? New question

No. There are anti-flu drugs available to treat the flu and only work against flu viruses. They will not help lessen the symptoms from the common cold.

### Is a "stomach bug" really the flu? New question

No. People often get confused about the differences between the flu and a "stomach bug." These illnesses are very different. Flu is an illness of the respiratory system, including the nose, throat and lungs. Symptoms include fever, cough, sore throat and a stuffy or runny nose. Flu symptoms may include vomiting and diarrhea in some people. A "stomach bug" is an illness of the body's gastrointestinal system (stomach and intestines) caused by different germs. Symptoms of a "stomach bug" include nausea, diarrhea and vomiting, and usually do not include cough, sore throat, and runny or stuffy nose.

# SEASONAL FLU

## What is seasonal flu?

Seasonal flu is a disease of the body's breathing system, including the nose, throat and lungs. Flu is short for "influenza." Seasonal flu is caused by a virus.

In New England, the yearly flu season usually begins in late fall and lasts through March. Seasonal flu is a little different from "H1N1" flu, which was first recognized during April of 2009 and quickly spread to many parts of the world (becoming a "pandemic" or global outbreak). But seasonal flu causes symptoms like H1N1 flu, is spread like H1N1 flu, and can be prevented like H1N1 flu.

## What are the symptoms of seasonal flu?

The most common symptoms of flu are fever, cough, and sore throat. They can also include body aches, headache, chills, runny nose and feeling very tired. Some people also have diarrhea and vomiting. Symptoms last from a few days to up to a week or more.

## Is seasonal flu serious?

Yes, seasonal flu can be very serious. Every year in the U.S. seasonal flu causes thousands of hospital admissions and deaths. Some people are at higher risk of serious health problems when they get the flu. This includes pregnant women, infants, the elderly and people with medical conditions like asthma, diabetes, heart disease, kidney disease and weakened immune systems.

Every year in the United States, on average:

- 5% to 20% of the population gets seasonal flu;
- more than 200,000 people are hospitalized because of seasonal flu complications, and;
- about 36,000 people die from seasonal flu.

## How does seasonal flu spread?

The flu virus is in the wet spray (droplets of saliva and mucous) that comes out of the nose and mouth of someone who coughs or sneezes. If you are close enough to a person with the flu (3 - 6 feet) when they cough or sneeze, you can breathe in the virus and get sick. Flu symptoms start 1 - 4 days (usually 2 days) after a person breathes in the virus.

Flu is spread easily from person to person. The virus can also get on things you touch like doorknobs, phones and toys. After you touch these objects, you can catch the virus when you touch your mouth, nose, or eyes.

Adults with the seasonal flu can spread it from about one day before symptoms appear to about one week after. Children can spread the flu even longer after they get sick. In general, people with flu are most infectious (able to spread influenza) while they have a fever.

## **How is seasonal flu treated?** Revised answer

There are prescription drugs available that your doctor may give you to treat seasonal flu. The drugs work best if started soon after the start of symptoms. Your doctor can determine if you need treatment.

Treatment with anti-flu drugs is usually not needed for healthy people who have symptoms of mild flu or appear to be getting better when sick with the flu. However, persons with flu-like illness who have severe symptoms and need medical care should receive anti-flu medication promptly.

People sick with any type of flu should make sure to drink plenty of fluids, get plenty of rest, eat healthy foods, wash their hands frequently and stay home to avoid spreading the flu to other people. Over the counter pain relievers may help people with the flu feel more comfortable. Children and teens with the flu should never take aspirin, because a rare but serious disease called Reye syndrome can occur.

## **Do most insurers cover prescription anti-flu medications?**

Health insurance may cover the cost of these drugs. Talk to your health insurance company to find out if you are covered for these medications.

## **Is there a vaccine for seasonal flu?**

Yes. A vaccine helps your body to protect itself against a disease. There are two types of vaccines for seasonal flu: the flu shot (given with a needle injection, usually in the arm) and the nasal-spray (a spray that is inhaled through the nose). Getting the vaccine is the best way to protect yourself against seasonal flu. Getting flu vaccine will **not** give you the flu or any other type of illness.

## **Who should get seasonal flu vaccine?**

In general, anyone who wants to reduce their chances of getting seasonal flu can get vaccinated. It is especially important that the people listed below get a seasonal flu shot every year.

- Children aged 6 months up to their 19<sup>th</sup> birthday
- Pregnant women
- People 50 years of age and older
- People of any age with certain chronic medical conditions like asthma, diabetes, heart disease, kidney disease and weakened immune systems.
- People who live in nursing homes and other long term care facilities
- Anyone else who might spread flu to someone at increased risk of having serious health problems from flu. For example, health care workers, direct care staff, and people who live with or care for anyone on the list above.

## How do I know if I have seasonal flu?

If you have symptoms of flu, it could be seasonal or H1N1 flu. If you think you have the flu, stay home from work and school and avoid contact with others so you don't spread the virus. If you think you might have flu and you need to see your doctor, call ahead and let them know you might have the flu. That way, your doctor's office can take steps to avoid the spread of flu to others. The doctor may recommend that you be tested for influenza.

## I think I have the flu. Should I get tested? New question

There is no need for children and adults with mild flu symptoms to be tested for the flu virus. Testing does not usually affect treatment or medical advice. Most people with the flu who are generally in good health will recover without needing to visit a doctor. People with severe illness or hospital patients may be tested for flu.

## How can I prevent getting seasonal flu?

- Get seasonal flu vaccine every year especially if you have a medical condition which makes health complications from the flu more likely.
- Wash your hands often with soap and water, or use an alcohol-based hand gel.
- Cough or sneeze into a tissue or into the inside of your elbow if you don't have a tissue. Throw tissues away and wash your hands. Always wash your hands before touching your eyes, nose or mouth.
- Use a regular household cleaner to clean things that are touched often, like door knobs, toys, phones and faucets.
- Avoid close physical contact with people who are sick. Try to stay at least 3-6 feet from someone who is sick with the flu.
- People with young children, a weak immune system or a chronic illness should avoid large crowds, if possible.
- **Stay home from work and school if you get sick with a flu-like illness and avoid contact with others so the virus does not spread. Stay at home until you have been free from fever for at least 24 hours after your last dose of fever-reducing medication (like Tylenol, Advil or Motrin).** For most people this will mean staying at home for about 4 days.

## How do I take care of someone who is sick with seasonal flu?

*Flu: What You Can Do - Caring for People At Home* is a booklet available in nine languages that gives you lots of information to help you care for someone who has the flu in their home. A video is also available in English and Spanish. *Flu: What You Can Do* information can be found at: [www.mass.gov/flu](http://www.mass.gov/flu) . See also: [Caring for People with the Flu](#)

## How long can the flu virus live on objects?

Flu viruses, including the H1N1 virus, can survive on surfaces for several hours. When the wet droplets on objects like doorknobs, phones and toys are completely dry, the virus can't cause

infection. If someone you live with is sick with the flu, it is important to clean frequently touched surfaces often with regular household cleaner, especially bedside tables, surfaces in the bathroom, kitchen counters and toys for children. It can be very difficult to keep these types of surfaces free of virus, which is why washing your hands often is so important.

# H1N1 FLU

## What is H1N1 flu?

Flu is a disease of the body's breathing system, including the nose, throat and lungs. Flu is short for "influenza." H1N1 flu is caused by a new virus that was first recognized in April of 2009, and was called "swine flu." H1N1 flu quickly spread to many parts of the world and is now a "pandemic," or global outbreak. H1N1 flu is not the same as swine flu, which is a virus that pigs can get. It is not the same as "seasonal" flu which occurs every year, during the winter and early spring. But H1N1 flu causes symptoms that are similar to seasonal flu, is spread like seasonal flu, and can be prevented like seasonal flu.

## What are the symptoms of H1N1 flu?

H1N1 flu symptoms are very similar to seasonal flu symptoms. Most common are fever, cough, and sore throat. They can also include body aches, headache, chills, runny nose and feeling very tired. Some people also have diarrhea and vomiting. Symptoms last from a few days to up to a week or more.

## Is H1N1 flu serious?

Yes, H1N1 flu can be very serious. In the U.S., several thousand people were hospitalized and several hundred died between April and August, 2009. Because H1N1 is a new virus, our bodies have not built up any resistance to it. That is why so many people may get sick. Like with seasonal flu, some people are at higher risk of serious health problems when they get the H1N1 flu. This includes pregnant women, infants, and people with medical conditions like asthma, diabetes, heart disease, kidney disease and weakened immune systems.

## How does H1N1 flu spread?

The flu virus is in the wet spray (droplets of saliva and mucous) that comes out of the nose and mouth of someone who coughs or sneezes. If you are close enough to a person with the flu (3 - 6 feet) when they cough or sneeze, you can breathe in the virus and get sick. Flu symptoms start 1 to 4 days (usually 2 days) after a person breathes in the virus.

Flu is spread easily from person to person. The virus can also get on things you touch like doorknobs, phones and toys. After you touch these objects, you can catch the virus when you touch your mouth, nose, or eyes. However, when the wet droplets on these types of objects dry out, the virus can't cause infection.

Adults with the H1N1 flu can spread it from about one day before symptoms appear to about one week after. Children can spread the flu even longer after they get sick. In general, people with flu are most infectious (able to spread influenza) while they have a fever.

## **How do I know if I have H1N1 flu?**

If you have symptoms of flu, it could be seasonal or H1N1 flu. If you think you have the flu, stay home from work and school and avoid contact with others so the virus does not spread. If you think you might have flu and you need to see your doctor, call ahead and let them know you might have the flu. That way, your doctor's office can take steps to avoid the spread of flu to others.

## **I think I have the flu. Should I get tested for H1N1 flu?** New question

There is no need for children and adults with mild flu symptoms to be tested for the H1N1 flu virus. Testing does not usually affect treatment or medical advice. Most people with the flu who are generally in good health will recover without needing to visit a doctor. People with severe illness or hospital patients may be tested for H1N1. People with underlying or chronic medical conditions, such as diabetes, asthma, heart disease or weakened immune systems, should talk to their doctor if they develop flu symptoms to ask if they should be tested.

## **How is H1N1 flu treated?** Revised answer

Antiviral (anti-flu) drugs are prescription medicines (pills, liquid or an inhaler) that can be used to treat H1N1 flu, or to prevent infection with H1N1 flu viruses. There are currently two drugs approved to treat H1N1 flu. The drugs work best if started soon after the start of symptoms. While getting a flu vaccine each year is the first and most important step in protecting against flu, antiviral drugs are a second line of defense in the prevention and treatment of flu.

Treatment with anti-flu drugs is usually not needed for healthy people who have symptoms of mild flu or appear to be getting better when sick with the flu. However, persons with flu-like illness who have severe symptoms and need medical care should receive anti-flu medication promptly.

People sick with any type of flu should make sure to drink plenty of fluids, get plenty of rest, eat healthy foods, wash their hands frequently and stay home to avoid spreading the flu to other people. Over the counter pain relievers may help people with the flu feel more comfortable. Children and teens with the flu should never take aspirin, because a rare but serious disease called Reye syndrome can occur.

## **Do I need a prescription for one of the anti-flu drugs?**

Yes. Antiviral drugs are prescription medicines (pills, liquid or an inhaler) that fight against the flu by keeping flu viruses from reproducing in the body. The two prescription anti-flu medications doctors can prescribe to treat both seasonal and H1N1 flu are oseltamivir (oss-el-TAM-eh-veer), brand name "Tamiflu," and zanamivir (zan-AM-i-veer), brand name "Relenza."

## **Do most insurers cover prescription anti-flu medications?**

Health insurance may cover the cost of these drugs. Talk to your health insurance company to find out if you are covered for these medications.



## How do I protect myself from getting sick with H1N1 flu?

- Get vaccinated when the vaccine becomes available, especially if you have a medical condition which makes health complications from the flu more likely.
- Wash your hands often with soap and water or use alcohol based hand gel.
- Cough or sneeze into a tissue or the inside of your elbow if you don't have a tissue. Throw the tissue in the trash and wash your hands. Always wash your hands before you touch your eyes, nose or mouth.
- Use a household cleaner to clean surfaces that might get flu virus on them like door knobs, phones, faucets and toys.
- Avoid close physical contact with people who are sick. Try to stay at least 3-6 feet from someone who is sick with the flu. People with young children, a weak immune system or a chronic illness should avoid large crowds, if possible.
- **Stay home from work and school if you get sick with a flu-like illness and avoid contact with others so the virus does not spread. Stay at home until you have been free from fever for at least 24 hours after your last dose of fever-reducing medication (like Tylenol, Advil or Motrin).** For most people this will mean staying at home for about 4 days.

## How do I take care of someone who is sick with H1N1 flu?

*Flu: What You Can Do - Caring for People At Home* is a booklet available in nine languages that gives you lots of information to help you care for someone who has the flu in their home. A video is also available in English and Spanish. *Flu: What You Can Do* information can be found at: [www.mass.gov/flu](http://www.mass.gov/flu). See also: **Caring for People with the Flu**

## How long can the flu virus live on objects?

Flu viruses, including the H1N1 virus, can survive on surfaces for several hours. When the wet droplets on objects like doorknobs, phones and toys are completely dry, the virus can't cause infection. If someone you live with is sick with the flu, it is important to clean frequently touched surfaces often with regular household cleaner, especially bedside tables, surfaces in the bathroom, kitchen counters and toys for children. It can be very difficult to keep these types of surfaces free of virus, which is why washing your hands often is so important.

## PREVENTING THE FLU

### How do I protect myself from getting or spreading the flu?

- Get the flu vaccine especially if you have a condition which makes health complications from the flu more likely.
- Wash your hands often with soap and water, or use an alcohol-based hand gel.
- Cough or sneeze into a tissue or into the inside of your elbow if you don't have a tissue. Throw tissues away and wash your hands. Always wash your hands before touching your eyes, nose or mouth.
- Use a household cleaner to clean things that are touched often, like door knobs, toys, phones and faucets.
- Avoid close physical contact with people who are sick. Try to stay at least 3-6 feet from someone who is sick with the flu.
- People with young children, a weak immune system or a chronic illness should avoid large crowds, if possible.
- **Stay home from work and school if you get sick with a flu-like illness and avoid contact with others so the virus does not spread. Stay at home until you have been free from fever for at least 24 hours after your last dose of fever-reducing medication (like Tylenol, Advil or Motrin).** For most people this will mean staying at home for about four days.

### What is "respiratory hygiene" and "cough etiquette"?

Respiratory hygiene and cough etiquette mean that people:

- Carefully cover their nose and mouth with a disposable tissue every time they cough or sneeze. If they do not have a tissue, they should cough or sneeze into their sleeves or upper arm.
- Dispose of used tissues immediately into a trash receptacle.

### Should I wear a facemask to prevent H1N1 Flu? New question

DPH does not recommend that members of the general public wear facemasks to protect against H1N1 flu. Evidence shows that this is not effective in preventing spread of flu in the community. People often use masks incorrectly, or contaminate them when putting them on and taking them off, which could actually increase the risk of infection. The use of facemask should never replace other steps to prevent the spread of flu, including washing hands often with soap and water, staying away from other people when they are ill, and avoiding crowds and gatherings as much as possible.

However, there are some circumstances where a facemask may be used to reduce the spread of the flu especially for persons who are at high risk for complications from the flu. Some examples are:

- If you are in a high risk group for complications from the flu you should try to avoid close contact (within 3- 6 feet) with household members who are sick. If close contact with a sick individual is unavoidable, consider wearing a facemask.
- If you are breast feeding your baby while you are sick, try to wear a face mask so your baby does not get sick.
- If you are sick with the flu and need to go to a doctor’s office, to an emergency room, or to any other healthcare facility, wear a facemask if it is available and tolerable. Healthcare personnel may also ask patients who are coughing or have symptoms of a respiratory infection to put on a mask when they enter a facility.
- In schools, students and staff with flu-like illnesses should be put in a separate room until they can be sent home. Ill persons should wear a facemask if possible and those caring for them should wear masks too.

### **What is “hand hygiene”?**

Keeping hands clean is one of the most important steps we can take to avoid getting sick and spreading germs to others, including the flu virus. It is best to wash your hands with soap and clean running water for 20 seconds. However, if soap and clean water are not available, use an alcohol-based product to clean your hands.

Alcohol-based hand sanitizers significantly reduce the number of germs on skin and are easy to use. To use an alcohol-based hand sanitizer, apply the product to the palm of one hand and rub hands together. Rub the product over all surfaces of hands and fingers until hands are dry.

### **Is using alcohol-based hand sanitizer safe?**

Yes, alcohol-based hand sanitizers are safe when used correctly to clean hands. Alcohol-based hand sanitizers are poisonous and should not be ingested (eaten). They are also flammable and should be kept away from fires and flames. Keep alcohol-based hand sanitizers out of the reach of children and supervise your children when they are using hand sanitizers. If swallowed, get medical help or contact a Poison Control Center right away (800-222-1222).

### **How long can the flu virus live on objects?**

Flu viruses, including the H1N1 virus, can survive on surfaces for several hours. When the wet droplets on objects like doorknobs, phones and toys are completely dry, the virus can’t cause infection. If someone you live with is sick with the flu, it is important to clean frequently touched surfaces often with regular household cleaner, especially bedside tables, surfaces in the bathroom, kitchen counters and toys for children. It can be very difficult to keep these types of surfaces free of virus, which is why washing your hands often is so important.

### **How can I protect my infant younger than 6 months from the flu?**

Infants less than 6 months old are at high risk for serious flu-related complications, but cannot get a vaccine or anti-flu drugs. All family members in the house who are able to get the vaccine should have it so flu is not brought into the home. Additional ways to protect your infant

include: avoiding large crowds during flu outbreaks, having people wash their hands before touching your baby, and avoiding kissing or close contact by members of the family who may be ill. In general, it is best for anyone who may be sick not to have close contact with your baby.

### **Should I stop breastfeeding my baby if I think I have come in contact with the flu?**

No. Breastfeeding is really important in young babies when their immune system is still developing because breast milk has antibodies in it that help protect babies from infection. It is OK to take anti-flu medicines to prevent the flu while you are breastfeeding. You should make sure you wash your hands often and take everyday precautions. However, if you develop symptoms of the flu such as fever, cough, or sore throat, you should ask someone who is not sick to help you care for your baby. If you become sick, you can wear a disposable facemask while breastfeeding or someone who is not sick can give your baby your expressed milk. If you have questions about breastfeeding, call your doctor or your baby's doctor.

### **Can household cleaning help prevent spreading the flu?**

Yes. To help prevent transmission, clean frequently touched surfaces, such as doorknobs, refrigerator handle, toilet seat and handle. Clean all hard surfaces, for example, bedside tables, bathroom surfaces and children's toys, with a standard household disinfectant. If surfaces are visibly dirty, use a household cleaner first, then a disinfectant. Wash your hands with soap and water after cleaning surfaces and items. However, it can be very difficult to keep these types of surfaces free of virus all the time, which is why washing your hands often is so important.

### **Should I avoid large social events and other public gatherings?**

During the flu season or during a pandemic, you should stay home from work and school if you get sick with a flu-like illness and avoid contact with others so you do not spread the virus. Stay at home until you have been free from fever for at least 24 hours after your last dose of fever-reducing medication (like Tylenol, Advil or Motrin). For most people this will mean staying at home for about four days.

To minimize your chances of getting the flu, in general you might consider staying away from public gatherings, especially those that are likely to involve very close contact with other people. Also, during the current pandemic caused by the H1N1 flu, or even during seasonal flu season, public health officials may recommend other ways to protect the community's health by staying away from other people.

### **What are the benefits of anti-flu drugs? New question**

Anti-flu drugs can make your illness milder and help you feel better faster. They may also prevent serious flu complications. Anti-flu drugs are especially important for people who are very sick (hospitalized) or people who are sick with the flu and who are at increased risk of serious complications from the flu, such as pregnant women, young children and those with chronic health conditions.

## **H1N1 versus SEASONAL FLU**

### **How is H1N1 flu different from seasonal flu?**

- Seasonal flu is caused by different flu viruses than H1N1 flu.
- Seasonal flu occurs every year, most often during the winter and early spring.
- Because H1N1 is a new virus, our bodies have not built up any resistance to it. That is why so many people may get sick.
- Pandemic flu, like H1N1 flu, occurs once every 30 years or so.
- Seasonal flu most severely affects people 65 years and older.
- H1N1 is currently being seen more often in children and young adults between the ages of 5 and 24 years old.
- A vaccine is available every year to help prevent seasonal flu.
- H1N1 vaccine is expected to be available in October 2009.

## VACCINE SAFETY

According to the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC), “Influenza vaccination is the most effective method for preventing influenza and influenza-related complications”. Both seasonal flu vaccine and H1N1 flu vaccine, should be available in Massachusetts during the fall and winter of 2009. This document has been developed to address questions concerning the safety of the vaccines used to protect against seasonal and H1N1 flu.

### **Are seasonal and H1N1 vaccines safe?**

Yes, seasonal and H1N1 vaccines are among the safest medications that are administered to people, including prescription drugs and over-the-counter medications.

Like any vaccine or medication, seasonal and H1N1 vaccines should be administered by trained health professionals who will determine which vaccine is best suited to each patient. A patient with an allergy to eggs, for example, should avoid vaccines derived from eggs in order to avoid an allergic reaction to the vaccine.

### **How well does the flu vaccine work?**

According to the CDC, how well the flu vaccine works depends on how close the match is between the flu vaccine and the types of flu viruses that are circulating in the community. Every year, scientists try to predict what types of flu viruses are most likely to cause illness each year so these strains can be included in the vaccine. In years when the vaccine strains and the virus strains are well-matched, the vaccine can reduce the chances of getting the flu by 70%-90% in healthy adults. The vaccine may be somewhat less effective in elderly persons and very young children, but vaccination can still prevent serious complications from the flu. In healthy adults less than 65 years of age, the flu vaccine can also prevent lost work days, and keep you from having to see the doctor or using unnecessary antibiotics.

### **Are there some people who should not get a flu shot?**

Yes. For example, people who are sick with a fever at the time the shot is available, people with certain allergies, and people with certain medical conditions. People who have had Guillain-Barré syndrome within six weeks of a previous dose of flu vaccine should talk with their doctor before getting the flu shot.

### **Can pregnant women get flu vaccine during their pregnancy?**

Yes, it is safe to give seasonal and H1N1 vaccines to pregnant women anytime during pregnancy.

### **Do people die from getting a flu shot?**

No, there have been **no** deaths associated with getting a flu shot. In contrast, thousands of people die every year from flu illness in the United States.

### **Are vaccines tested?**

Yes, vaccines are tested in people before they are approved for wider use. Vaccines are only approved for wider use if the testing (called a “clinical trial”) shows that the vaccines are safe to use. Once vaccines are approved and are being used throughout the country, any problem following vaccination should be reported by healthcare providers to a national reporting system. This reporting of “adverse events” allows the safety of the vaccine to be continuously monitored.

### **So there’s testing and monitoring?**

Yes, the CDC, in conjunction with the Massachusetts Department of Public Health (DPH), local boards of health, and healthcare providers, provide careful and on-going monitoring of any potential problems related to a vaccine.

### **What about thimerosal that is used as a preservative?**

There continues to be no scientific evidence that thimerosal causes harm. The amount of mercury that is contained in the preservative is within the range that is considered safe. It is so low that it should not be a concern. The type of flu vaccine that is sprayed into your nose (nasal spray) does not contain thimerosal or other preservatives.

### **Aren’t there side effects of getting vaccinated?**

There can be side effects, yes. Most of the time side effects are mild and easy to manage. As with any vaccination, some people may have a feeling of warmth or soreness at the site of the injection. Some people may feel like they’re coming down with a mild fever for a couple of days after the shot. Most people do not experience any side effects, and those that do experience side effects have mild side effects. Serious side effects are extremely rare.

### **Can I get the flu from the flu shot?**

No, flu vaccines (seasonal or H1N1) do **not** cause flu.

### **I have heard that the H1N1 vaccine has been rushed through the testing process. Is it safe?**

H1N1 vaccine is being made exactly the same way seasonal flu vaccine is made every year, and with the same testing process required before distribution. It is as safe as seasonal influenza vaccine.

### **What is the bottom line concerning influenza vaccine safety?**

Flu is a serious respiratory disease that causes thousands of deaths every year in the United States. It is preventable. Keeping safe from the flu greatly outweighs the very small risk of side effects from both seasonal and H1N1 vaccines.

## SEASONAL FLU VACCINE

### What is flu vaccine (flu shot)?

A vaccine helps your body to protect itself against a disease. There are two types of vaccines for seasonal flu: the flu shot (given with a needle injection, usually in the arm) and the nasal-spray flu vaccine (given as a spray that is inhaled through the nose). Vaccines are the best way to protect yourself against seasonal flu. Getting a flu vaccine will **not** give you the flu or any other type of illness. Ask your doctor which vaccine you should get.

To find out how to get the seasonal flu vaccine, contact a doctor or your local health department. You can also visit [flu.masspro.org](http://flu.masspro.org) or call 866-627-7968 to find a public flu clinic near you.

### Who should get the seasonal flu vaccine?

In general, anyone who wants to reduce their chances of getting seasonal flu can get vaccinated. The nasal spray flu vaccine is only for healthy people age 2 - 49 years and who are not pregnant. Everyone else should get a flu shot. It is especially important that the people listed below get a flu shot every year.

- Children age 6 months up to their 19<sup>th</sup> birthday
- Pregnant women
- People 50 years of age and older
- People with certain health problems like diabetes, asthma, or heart disease

### Who should NOT get the seasonal flu vaccine?

There are some people who should not be vaccinated. They include:

- People who have a severe allergy to chicken eggs
- People who have had a severe reaction to an influenza vaccination in the past
- People who have had Guillain-Barré syndrome should talk to their doctor or nurse.
- Children less than 6 months of age
- People who are sick with a fever (these people can get vaccinated once their symptoms resolve)

### Does flu vaccine work right away? New question

No. It takes about two weeks after vaccination for antibodies to develop in the body and provide protection. In the meantime, you are still at risk for getting the flu. That's why it's better to get vaccinated early in the fall, before the flu season really gets under way. Results of testing the H1N1 vaccine suggest that the body develops a similar response to H1N1 vaccine in the same amount of time.



### **Why does my child need two doses flu vaccine?**

In order to better protect children against the flu, they need two doses. This only applies to children 6 months up to 9 years of age who are getting a flu vaccine for the first time. The second dose should be given 28 or more days after the first dose.

### **Are there other vaccines I should get?**

Pneumonia is a serious complication of the flu. The best way to prevent one common kind of pneumonia is to be vaccinated against it. The vaccine is called pneumococcal vaccine. People who should get this vaccine include:

- Children ages 2-24 months old
- Adults age 65 years and older
- People ages 2-64 years old who have serious health problems or weakened immune systems, or are smokers or have asthma

Talk with your doctor about whether you or your family members should get this vaccine.

## H1N1 FLU VACCINE

### Is there a vaccine for H1N1 flu? **Revised answer**

Yes. A vaccine helps your body to protect itself against a disease. A vaccine has been developed and will be available during the fall of 2009 and winter of 2010. Most children under the age of 10 will need two shots of H1N1 vaccine, separated by approximately 3 – 4 weeks. Getting H1N1 flu vaccine will not give you the flu or any other type of illness.

To find out how to get the H1N1 flu vaccine, contact a doctor or your local health department. You can also visit [flu.masspro.org/](http://flu.masspro.org/) or call 866-627-7968 to find a public flu clinic near you.

### Who should get the H1N1 flu vaccine?

Five groups have been identified by CDC to get this vaccine when it becomes available: pregnant women; persons who live with or provide care for infants under 6 months of age (e.g., parents, siblings, and daycare providers); health-care and emergency medical services personnel; persons age 6 months to 24 years; and persons age 25 to 64 years who have medical conditions that put them at higher risk for influenza-related complications. *Note: Current studies indicate the risk for infection among persons over 65 years of age is less than the risk for persons in younger age groups.*

### Who should NOT get the H1N1 vaccine?

There are some people who should not be vaccinated. They include:

- Children less than 6 months of age
- People who have a severe allergy to chicken eggs should not get vaccine made from eggs.
- People who have had a severe reaction to an influenza vaccination in the past
- People who have had Guillain-Barré syndrome should talk to their doctor or nurse.
- People who are sick with a fever (these people can get vaccinated once their symptoms lessen)

### Does the H1N1 flu vaccine work right away? **New question**

No. It takes about two weeks after receiving the seasonal flu shot for antibodies to develop in the body and provide protection. In the meantime, you are still at risk for getting the flu. Results of testing the H1N1 vaccine suggest that the body develops a similar response to H1N1 vaccine in the same amount of time.

### Can I get the seasonal and the H1N1 flu shots at the same time? **New question**

Flu shots can be given at the same time and in 2 different sites (e.g. left arm and right arm). But you cannot get both the seasonal flu nasal-spray vaccine and the H1N1 nasal-spray vaccine at the same time. Talk to your doctor about which vaccine is right for you and your children.

### **Are there other vaccines available?**

Pneumonia is a serious complication of the flu. The best way to prevent one common kind of pneumonia is to be vaccinated against it. The vaccine is called pneumococcal vaccine. People who should get this vaccine include:

- Children ages 2-24 months old
- Adults age 65 years and older
- People ages 2-64 years old who have serious health problems or weakened immune systems, or are smokers or have asthma

Talk with your doctor about whether you or your family members should get this vaccine.

### **Is it true that people will be forced to get vaccinated for H1N1 flu?** New question

No. Although there have been rumors that DPH or other health officials will require or force residents of Massachusetts to be vaccinated for the H1N1 flu, the rumors are *simply not true*. The decision to get vaccinated for both seasonal and H1N1 flu is *completely voluntary* and an individual decision.

## CARING WITH PEOPLE WITH THE FLU

### What should I do if I have or someone in my home has flu-like symptoms or are diagnosed with flu?

The most important thing to know about H1N1 flu is that the symptoms people have and the way you care for someone who is sick are very similar to seasonal flu.

- **Stay home** and limit contact with others in your household as much as possible.
- Rest, drink plenty of fluids and take medications that you typically use to treat flu-like symptoms, such as acetaminophen or ibuprofen. Children and teens with the flu should never take aspirin, because a rare but serious disease called Reye syndrome can occur.
- Use good respiratory hygiene/cough etiquette, which means that you:
  - Carefully cover your nose and mouth with a disposable tissue every time you cough or sneeze. If you do not have a tissue, cough or sneeze into your sleeves or upper arm.
  - Dispose of used tissues immediately into a trash receptacle and wash your hands.
- Handwashing is the single most effective way to prevent the spread of germs, including the flu virus. Wash your hands often! Wash your hands with soap and water, or use an alcohol-based hand gel.
- Avoid having visitors. If visitors must enter your home, they should avoid close contact with you.

### What are the benefits of H1N1 anti-flu drugs? New question

Anti-flu drugs can make your illness milder and help you feel better faster. They may also prevent serious flu complications. Anti-flu drugs are especially important for people who are very sick (hospitalized) or people who are sick with the flu and who are at increased risk of serious complications from the flu, such as pregnant women, young children and those with chronic health conditions.

### What are fever reducing medications and when should I stop taking them?

Fever-reducing medications contain medicines like acetaminophen (Tylenol), ibuprofen (Motrin and Advil) or aspirin (adults only). These medicines can be given to people who are sick with flu to help bring their fever down and relieve their pain. As you begin to feel better you will probably not need fever-reducing medicines and will stop taking them. You should stay at home until your fever is gone for at least 24 hours after the last dose of fever-reducing medication.

#### Children:

- Never give aspirin to children 18 years and younger. It can cause a dangerous illness called Reye Syndrome.
- Check ingredient labels on over-the-counter cold and flu medications to see if they contain aspirin.

- Children 5 years of age and older and teenagers with the flu can take medicines without aspirin, such as acetaminophen (Tylenol) and ibuprofen (Advil, Motrin, Nuprin), to relieve symptoms.
- Children younger than 4 years of age should NOT be given over-the-counter cold medications without first speaking with a health care provider.

### **Should I stop breastfeeding my baby if I think I have come in contact with the flu?**

No. Breastfeeding is really important in young babies when their immune system is still developing because breast milk has antibodies in it that help protect babies from infection. It is OK to take anti-flu medicines to prevent the flu while you are breastfeeding. You should make sure you wash your hands often and take everyday precautions. However, if you develop symptoms of the flu such as fever, cough, or sore throat, you should ask someone who is not sick to help you care for your baby. If you become sick, you can wear a disposable facemask while breastfeeding or someone who is not sick can give your baby your expressed milk. If you have questions about breastfeeding, call your doctor or your baby's doctor.

### **How do I care for someone with the flu at home?**

Follow the same steps and precautions for H1N1 flu that you would to avoid ordinary seasonal flu:

- If you are taking care of someone with the flu, speak with your doctor to see if you should take prescription anti-flu drugs.
- If possible, place the person with flu in a separate room, away from the common areas of your home. Respiratory treatments that may be associated with coughing, such as inhalers and nebulizers, should be used by the ill person in a separate room away from common areas of the house when possible.
- Limit your contact with the sick person. Avoid close contact such as kissing and do **not** share towels, drinking glasses, eating utensils or toothbrushes with the ill person.
- If you must have close contact (within 3-6 feet) with or are providing care to a member of your household with the flu **AND** you are at increased risk of severe illness or complications, consider wearing a disposable facemask. After removing the facemask, throw it in the trash and immediately wash your hands or use an alcohol-based hand gel. All household members should regularly wash their hands with soap and water or use an alcohol-based hand gel especially **after every contact with the sick person**. The sick person should also regularly wash his or her hands with soap and water or use an alcohol-based hand gel.
- Provide tissues to ill persons to use to cover their mouth and nose whenever they sneeze, cough or blow their nose. Make sure they immediately throw their used tissues in a nearby wastebasket. Both ill and well persons should wash their hands or use an alcohol-based hand gel after touching used tissues, similar waste and after emptying wastebaskets or trash receptacles.
- Do **not** give infants, children and young people under 18 years old aspirin or aspirin-containing products. These products can increase the risk of a rare and serious illness called Reye syndrome.

- Avoid having visitors. If visitors must enter the home, they should avoid close contact with the sick person.
- If you are washing the bed sheets and towels for the sick person, you should use household laundry soap and tumble dry on a hot setting if possible. Avoid “hugging” laundry close to your body when you are carrying it, and clean your hands with soap and water or alcohol-based hand rub after handling dirty laundry.
- Monitor well household members closely for the development of illness. Talk to your doctor about taking antiviral medication to prevent the caregiver from getting the flu.

### **What should I do if symptoms get worse?**

If symptoms get worse, especially if you begin to have trouble breathing, you should call your doctor or seek help at an emergency room. When going to the doctor’s office or the emergency room, you should avoid taking public transportation (subway or bus) if possible.

If you go to your doctor, please contact the doctor’s office before you leave home and tell them you have influenza-like symptoms. When you arrive at the doctor’s office, go straight to the receptionist or nurse so that you can be put in a private room while you wait. You may be asked to wear a mask and you should sit away from others as much as possible. If you call an ambulance, let the operator know that you have influenza-like symptoms, and also let the ambulance crew know when they arrive.

### **When should a person with the flu get emergency medical care?**

**In children**, 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, not interacting with others or confusion
- Being so irritable that the child does not want to be held
- Flu-like symptoms improve but then fever and cough return or get worse

**In adults**, 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 fever and cough return or get worse

*Flu: What You Can Do - Caring for People At Home* is a booklet available in nine languages that gives you lots of information to help you care for someone who has the flu in their home. A video is also available in English and Spanish. *Flu: What You Can Do* information can be found at: [www.mass.gov/flu](http://www.mass.gov/flu).

# INFLUENZA AND SCHOOLS

## **Who makes the decision to close schools?**

Under usual circumstances this is a local decision made by the school district and local health department. The Massachusetts Department of Public Health and local health departments work closely with the Massachusetts Department of Elementary and Secondary Education, local school districts and individual schools to make sound recommendations based on individual circumstances.

## **What is the best way to prevent the spread of H1N1 flu at schools that have cases of influenza?**

The best way to reduce the spread of both seasonal and H1N1 flu in schools continues to be the early identification of ill students, faculty or staff, having ill people stay home from school while sick and having all students, faculty and staff practice good respiratory hygiene/cough etiquette and hand hygiene.

## **H1N1 Influenza Vaccination**

H1N1 vaccine is expected to be available in October, 2009. Schools will need to work closely with local boards of health, community vaccinators, parents, students and healthcare providers to ensure that students are vaccinated. While vaccination may eventually be offered to everyone, initial target groups are:

- pregnant women
- household contacts and caregivers of infants less than 6 months of age
- persons aged 6 months to 24 years old
- persons aged 25 to 64 years old with certain health problems that can put them at increased risk for complications (such as heart disease, asthma, diabetes, weakened immune systems, certain muscle and nerve disorders that can lead to breathing or swallowing problems)
- healthcare providers and emergency medical services staff

## **What is "respiratory hygiene" and "cough etiquette"?**

Respiratory hygiene and cough etiquette mean that people:

- Carefully cover their nose and mouth with a disposable tissue every time they cough or sneeze. If they do not have a tissue, they should cough or sneeze into their sleeves or upper arm.
- Dispose of used tissues immediately into a trash receptacle.

## **What is “hand hygiene”?**

Keeping hands clean is one of the most important steps we can take to avoid getting sick and spreading germs to others, including the flu virus. It is best to wash your hands with soap and clean running water for 20 seconds. However, if soap and clean water are not available, use an alcohol-based product to clean your hands.

Alcohol-based hand sanitizers significantly reduce the number of germs on skin and are easy to use. To use an alcohol-based hand sanitizer, apply the product to the palm of one hand and rub hands together. Rub the product over all surfaces of hands and fingers until hands are dry.

## **What is the best way to be sure children who have flu-like symptoms or the flu do not go to school?**

Parents and guardians should monitor their children every morning for flu-like symptoms (fever of 100.4°F or greater, cough, sore throat, body aches, headache, chills, fatigue or possibly diarrhea or vomiting). Faculty and staff should check themselves for flu-like symptoms. Ill people should stay home. A “Flu Symptoms Checklist” is available at the DPH website at [www.mass.gov/flu](http://www.mass.gov/flu).

## **What if someone comes to school and then begins to show flu-like symptoms?**

Students, faculty and staff who appear to have a flu-like illness when they come to school or who become ill during the school day should be isolated in a room separate from other people. Their temperature should be taken and documented. Ill students, faculty or staff should be sent home in accordance with district procedures.

## **How long should students, faculty or staff with flu-like symptoms or confirmed H1N1 flu stay out of school?**

Keep your child home until at least 24 hours after he or she no longer has a fever or signs of a fever. This fever-free period *must* be without the use of fever-reducing medicines (any medicine that contains ibuprofen, such as Motrin, or acetaminophen, such as Tylenol). For many people, they can expect to stay home for about 4 days: 3 days with fever and one more day without any fever or taking any fever reducing medicines. However, some people may be sick for longer than 3-5 days and should be prepared to stay home as long as it takes for their fever and other symptoms to go away.



## RESOURCES

### Where can I get more information?

- Call your doctor, nurse or clinic, or your local board of health
- Call the Massachusetts Department of Public Health, Immunization Program at: (617) 983-6800 or toll-free at (888) 658-2850
- Massachusetts Department of Public Health website at: [www.mass.gov/flu](http://www.mass.gov/flu)
- Center for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) at: [www.cdc.gov/flu](http://www.cdc.gov/flu)
- Mass 2-1-1 provides flu information for the general public:
  - call 211 or 1-877-211-MASS (6277)
  
- For flu clinic information, visit the MassPRO Public Flu Clinic Finder website at: [flu.masspro.org/](http://flu.masspro.org/)