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Frequently Asked Questions About H1N1 Flu

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This fact sheet will provide basic information about the H1N1 influenza A virus (previously known as swine flu).

What is human H1N1 (swine flu)?

H1N1 influenza A infection is a new influenza virus causing illness in people. This new virus was first detected in people in the US in April 2009. This virus has been spreading from person-to-person, probably in much the same way that regular seasonal influenza viruses spread.

What are the signs and symptoms of H1N1 flu in people?

The symptoms of H1N1 flu in people are similar to the symptoms of regular human flu and include fever, cough, sore throat, body aches, headache, chills and fatigue. A significant number of people have reported diarrhea and vomiting associated with H1N1 flu. Like seasonal flu, H1N1 flu may cause a worsening of underlying chronic medical conditions.

How does H1N1 flu spread?

CDC has determined that this H1N1 influenza A virus is contagious and is spreading from human to human. Spread of this H1N1 influenza A virus is thought to happen in the same way that seasonal flu spreads. Flu viruses are spread mainly from person to person through coughing or sneezing of people with influenza. Sometimes people may become infected by touching something with flu viruses on it and then touching their mouth or nose.

How long can someone with the flu infect someone else?

Infected people may be able to infect others beginning 1 day before symptoms develop and up to 7-10 days after becoming sick. That means that you may be able to pass on the flu to someone else before you know you are sick, as well as while you are sick.

What should I do to keep from getting the flu?

- Wash your hands often, for 15 to 20 seconds, with soap and water, especially after you cough or sneeze. Alcohol-based hand cleaners are also effective.
- Avoid touching your eyes, nose or mouth. Germs spread this way.
- Try not to touch surfaces that may be contaminated with the flu virus.
- Try to avoid close contact with sick people.

What is the best way to keep from spreading the virus?

- If you are sick, stay home from work or school and limit your contact with others.
- Cover your nose and mouth with a tissue when you cough or sneeze. Throw the tissue in the trash after you use it. Cough into your sleeve or elbow if you do not have a tissue. Wash your hands.

Is there a vaccine for the H1N1 flu?

Currently there is no vaccine against the H1N1 flu. The regular seasonal flu vaccine does not protect against the H1N1 flu. Vaccines are currently under development and there is a possibility that there may be a vaccine against the H1N1 by the fall of 2009. If there is a vaccine available, CDC will provide recommendations as to who should receive the vaccine.

Are there medicines to treat H1N1 flu?

Yes, although it is expected that most people will recover without needing medical care. There are two medications, oseltamivir (Tamiflu®) and zanamivir (Relenza®), recommended to treat H1N1 influenza. CDC recommends prioritizing treatment of H1N1 for hospitalized patients or those at high risk for flu complications. Antiviral drugs are prescription medicines that fight against the flu by keeping flu viruses from reproducing in your body. If you get sick, antiviral drugs can make your illness milder and make you feel better faster. For treatment, antiviral drugs work best if started within 48 hours of symptom onset, but for severe illness medications should be begun even after this time period.

What should I do if I get sick?

If you become ill with influenza-like symptoms, including fever, body aches, runny nose, sore throat, nausea, or vomiting or diarrhea, you may want to contact your health care provider, particularly if you are worried about your symptoms. Your health care provider will determine whether influenza testing or treatment is needed.

If you 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 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

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 worse cough

If I have a family member at home who is sick with H1N1 flu, should I go to work or school?

People who are well but have an ill family member at home with H1N1 flu can go to work or school as usual. These people should monitor their health every day, and take everyday precautions as mentioned above. If they become ill, they should not go to work or school for 7 days or until they have been symptom free for 24 hours, whichever is longer. These recommendations may change if H1N1 becomes more severe.

How long can viruses live outside the body?

Studies have shown the influenza virus can survive on environmental surfaces and can infect a person for up to 2-8 hours after being deposited on a surface. Frequent handwashing will help you reduce the chance of getting contamination from these common surfaces.

What household cleaning should be done to prevent the spread of influenza virus? To prevent the spread of influenza virus, it is important to keep surfaces (especially bedside tables, surfaces in the bathroom, kitchen counters, and toys for children) clean by wiping them down with a household disinfectant (for example: bleach).

For more up-to-date information, please check the Harford County Health Department website at www.harfordcountyhealth.com or the DHMH website at www.dhmh.state.md.us/swineflu or the CDC website at www.cdc.gov/H1N1flu.