
H1N1 Influenza – Questions & Answers

Sept 2009

What is H1N1 influenza?

H1N1 Influenza (previously identified as swine flu) is a respiratory disease caused by type A influenza viruses. These viruses had been regularly found in pigs, but the virus transferred to humans during spring 2009 and is now spread from person to person as well.

What are the signs and symptoms of H1N1 flu?

The symptoms of H1N1 flu in people are similar to the symptoms of seasonal flu which include fever, cough, sore throat, body aches, headache, chills and fatigue. Some people have reported diarrhea and vomiting associated with H1N1 flu as well, but these two symptoms alone, without respiratory symptoms, do not indicate H1N1 infection. Like seasonal flu, H1N1 flu may cause a worsening of chronic medical conditions.

Why do the information and recommendations regarding H1N1 influenza seem to change so often?

The H1N1 virus is a “novel” virus; it was not identified in humans until a few months ago. Last spring when the first human cases were reported, the medical and research communities around the world did not have previous experience with this virus and therefore were not sure what to expect with human to human transmission. As time goes by and more is learned about H1N1, experts must continuously revise recommendations made to the public. We can expect further updates as more is learned about H1N1, especially if the virus mutates and affects people differently. It is important for all of us to stay informed as new information becomes available.

How does H1N1 flu spread?

Spread of H1N1 influenza A virus is thought to be similar to the spread of the seasonal flu. Flu viruses are spread mainly from person to person through the coughing and sneezing of infected people (known as airborne transmission). Sometimes people may also become infected by touching something with flu viruses on it and then touching their mouth or nose. Recent findings indicate that the H1N1 virus may be transmitted more by “touch” than other viruses. Transmission by touch happens when a person picks up the live virus deposited on a surface by an infected individual and then touches their own eyes, mouth or nose.

How long can someone with the flu infect someone else? If my child experiences influenza-like illness, when can he/she return to school?

Infected people may be able to infect others beginning 1 day before symptoms develop and up to 7 or more days after becoming sick. It is believed that young children may “shed” the virus which means they remain contagious longer than older individuals.

At the present time, The Centers for Disease Control and EPCDHE strongly recommend individuals who have influenza-like illness remain out of the community for a full 24 hours after they are fever-free (without the use of fever-reducing medications). Parents should also consider keeping a child home for a longer period of time if their child’s symptoms would interfere with their ability to function at school.

How long can viruses live outside the body?

We know that some viruses and bacteria can live 2 hours or longer on surfaces like tables, light switches, doorknobs, keyboards, and desks. Frequent and thorough hand washing will help reduce the chance of getting contaminated from these common surfaces.

What should I do to keep from getting the flu?

First and most important, wash your hands. Try to stay in good general health. Get plenty of sleep, be physically active, manage your stress, drink plenty of fluids, and eat nutritious food. Try not to touch surfaces that may be contaminated with the flu virus. Avoid close contact with people who are sick, which may mean avoiding crowds.

Avoid touching your mouth, nose, and eyes. If you are able to receive the H1N1 vaccine once it is released, do so, and speak to your health care provider about getting the seasonal flu shot now.

Are there medicines to treat H1N1 flu?

Yes; antiviral drugs are prescription medicines (pills, liquid or an inhaler) 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. They may also prevent serious flu complications. For treatment, antiviral drugs work best if started soon after getting sick (within 2 days of symptoms). At the present time, the CDC and EPCDHE do not recommend routine use of these medications. It is recommended that only certain individuals who are at high-risk for complications from H1N1 infection be prescribed antiviral medication.

What can I do to protect myself and my family members from getting sick?

Until the vaccine for H1N1 influenza is available, there are some everyday actions that can help prevent the spread of germs that cause respiratory illnesses like influenza. Take these everyday steps to protect your health:

- Cough and sneeze into your sleeve or cover your nose and mouth with a tissue. Throw the tissue in the trash after you use it and then wash your hands.
- Wash your hands often with soap and water for 20 seconds, especially after you cough or sneeze. Alcohol-based hand cleaners are also effective.
- Avoid touching your eyes, nose or mouth. Germs are spread this way.
- Try to avoid close contact with sick people. This may mean avoiding large crowds.
- If you get sick with influenza, it is recommended that you stay home from work or school and limit contact with others to keep from infecting them.

What is the best way to keep from spreading H1N1 virus?

If you are sick, limit your contact with other people as much as possible. Do not go to work or school until you are fever-free for a full 24 hours without the use of fever-reducing medications. Cough/sneeze into your sleeve or cover your mouth and nose with a tissue when coughing/sneezing.

What is the best technique for washing my hands to avoid getting the flu?

Washing your hands often will help protect you from germs. Use soap and warm water and wash from wrists to fingertips for 20 seconds. Remember to wash in between your fingers and the backs of your hands. When soap and water are not available, alcohol-based disposable hand wipes or gel sanitizers may be used. If using gel, rub your hands until the gel is dry.

Why doesn't everyone who experiences influenza-like illness get a lab test for influenza and/or H1N1 infection?

EPCDHE does not promote testing for H1N1 infection in all individuals experiencing influenza-like illness. The test to determine H1N1 infection is costly, and lab results are often not available until the patient is no longer experiencing symptoms and/or contagious. Some physicians are using "rapid testing" which indicates Influenza Type A, Influenza Type B, or rules out influenza altogether. Health Department personnel advise us to just assume that until seasonal flu arrives in the region, flu-like illness is most likely due to H1N1 infection. They further recommend we treat any influenza-like illness as if it were H1N1 infection and not be concerned about lab confirmation unless your physician indicates your situation warrants it.

I've heard that I shouldn't take my child to the doctor if he is experiencing mild symptoms. At what point should I be concerned? When is urgent medical attention necessary?

In children, emergency warning signs that need urgent medical attention include:

- Fast breathing or trouble breathing;
- Bluish skin color;
- Not drinking enough fluids;
- 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
- Fever with a rash
- If your child is in a high risk category, contact their physician at the onset of symptoms

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

Why is so much attention being paid to this virus? If most people who get H1N1 flu have mild symptoms for a few days, what's the big deal?

It's a "volume issue".

It is believed that, since this is a new virus, the majority of people have no immunity to H1N1. It appears that it is more likely for someone to become infected and ill with H1N1 virus after exposure than following exposure to typical seasonal flu viruses. As more people become ill, the chances that other people will be exposed to the virus increases, including those at risk for complications from H1N1.

Another concern is that influenza viruses can be unpredictable and have a history of evolving, or "mutating". The H1N1 virus has remained stable over the past few months; The World Health Organization and The Centers for Disease Control are closely monitoring the virus for changes, as this could lead to changes in its effect on humans who become infected.

Are there people in our community and schools with influenza-like illness?

Yes; The El Paso County Department of Health and Environment reports influenza-like illness is present throughout El Paso County at this time. In fact, cases have been reported within our county since late last spring; H1N1 influenza did not disappear during the summer months as was expected. The number of local cases is currently on the rise and EPCDHE anticipates this trend to continue over the following months. The Health Department advises county residents to prepare for the possibility of an extended flu season this school year.

What has Falcon School District 49 done to prepare for and respond to pandemic influenza?

The Falcon School District Pandemic Flu Response Team met on April 27, 2009; The District Pandemic Influenza Plan was activated on that day in response to CDC and WHO declaration of Pandemic Influenza, Phase 5. This plan details specific actions to be taken by The School District in the event of pandemic flu.

A District Liaison has been in regular contact with EPCDHE Communicable Disease Program epidemiologists. Symptom surveillance among students and staff began in late April and this information has been monitored closely; consultation with EPCDHE occurs on an as-needed basis.

What is being done at the school to help prevent my child from contracting this and other communicable diseases?

Falcon School District nurses, teachers, and other staff members have promoted disease prevention measures such as hand washing classes, cough etiquette and universal precaution reminders. Hand sanitizer has been made readily available in areas where hand washing with soap and water is not possible. A "Hot Shot" custodial cleaning crew has been established and is available for intense cleaning should a surge of illness or absences occur at a building. Individuals who display influenza-like symptoms at school are promptly isolated from others in a supervised area, asked to wear a mask, and parents are notified to come and pick up their student. Students displaying flu symptoms will not be sent home on the bus.

How are decisions regarding the response to pandemic influenza made within Falcon School District 49?

School district leadership consults with The Pandemic Flu Response Team and The El Paso County Department of Health and Environment when making decisions, all the while following the guidelines set forth by The Centers for Disease Control.

Will schools be closed?

There has been a change in recommendations from the CDC regarding school dismissal or closure in the event that H1N1 infection is identified within a school community. Currently, schools are advised to remain open unless student and/or staff absences are to a degree that the school's ability to carry on the business of learning is impacted. There are no specific percentages or numbers involved with these recommendations; decisions will be made on a case-by-case basis by school district leadership following consultation with EPCDHE personnel. Should the nature or extent of H1N1 infection change, these recommendations may be revised.

I heard that students at the school have H1N1. Why didn't I get a note or phone call about this?

EPCDHE advises school districts to avoid such notifications regarding H1N1 infections. Such communications would increase the chance of breaching confidentiality. Additionally, since routine testing for H1N1 infection is not recommended, anyone with influenza-like illness should be treated as someone with a positive lab test (at least until seasonal flu arrives in our area).

Parents can assume that since this virus is currently circulating throughout our region, the chance for exposure in any setting remains. Falcon School District 49 remains committed to minimizing this risk to students and staff and encourages everyone in our community do the same.

My student is in a high-risk category for complications for H1N1 influenza. What should I do?

The Centers for Disease Control recommends parents of children with histories of asthma, neurological conditions, diabetes, and other chronic medical conditions consult their child's physician now in order to develop a plan should their child contract H1N1 illness.

What can I do now to prepare for the possibility that my family is affected by H1N1?

All families are encouraged to make plans now for the possibility that someone in the household may become infected with H1N1 virus. Visit www.cdc.gov/h1n1flu/parents/ for tips on how to develop a Family Emergency Preparedness Plan.

What happens if my student displays influenza-like illness during the school day?

If your child displays influenza-like illness at school, he/she will be isolated from other individuals and placed in a supervised area and asked to wear a mask. A parent will be notified to pick up their child from the school within 20 minutes. If you know you will be unable to pick up your child within this timeframe, please plan now for another adult who will be available to pick up your child. Notify the school of this emergency contact person. We will always make attempts to contact parents first. Students displaying influenza-like illness will not be allowed to ride the bus.

When can my family members get the flu shot?

Seasonal flu shots are available now in Colorado Springs; check with your physician's office or visit one of several local pharmacies or urgent care facilities offering vaccinations. A listing of local flu shot clinics can be found at <http://www.immunizecolorado.com/findAFluClinic.asp>.

The H1N1 vaccine is expected to be available locally to certain people sometime in mid-October. High-risk individuals will be first to receive this shot. Monitor the EPCDHE website (www.elpasocountyhealth.org) for updated information.

Where can I get more information on H1N1 influenza?

Updated, accurate information regarding H1N1 can be found at www.cdc.gov; www.flu.gov; and www.elpasocountyhealth.org