



Seasonal Flu & Pandemic H1N1 Flu Information for Parents: Fall 2009

What is pandemic flu?

Pandemic influenza (flu) is a world-wide outbreak caused by a new flu virus. The virus spreads easily, and since this is a new flu virus, people have little or no immunity – or protection – against it. In the past, pandemic influenza has caused widespread illness and death.

Pandemic flu is different from seasonal flu. Seasonal flu outbreaks are caused by viruses that have been in communities before. Seasonal flu happens every year, usually during winter months. Pandemic flu is caused by a virus that is new to people. It is likely that pandemic flu will affect more people than seasonal flu because we have little or no immunity against it. Also, a flu pandemic could last longer than a typical flu season.

What is the H1N1 flu?

In April 2009, a new flu virus called novel H1N1 influenza (early on called “swine flu”) started making people ill. The H1N1 flu spread from person-to-person, much the same way that regular seasonal flu viruses spread. Now the new flu virus is called pandemic H1N1.

The symptoms of seasonal flu and pandemic H1N1 flu are similar and include fever, cough, sore throat, runny or stuffy nose, body aches, headache, chills and fatigue. Many people with the pandemic H1N1 flu, especially children, also have diarrhea and vomiting.

Why should I be concerned about pandemic H1N1 flu?

Both seasonal flu and the novel H1N1 flu viruses are expected to cause illness in this school year. Flu viruses are known to change as they move through the population. Scientists and health professionals are concerned that this new pandemic H1N1 flu virus could mutate (change) and cause more severe illness and death. Even if this does not happen, we expect there will be large numbers of sick people, which could overwhelm community resources.

Most people who get sick with flu get better without any medical attention. This has been true for the pandemic H1N1 flu virus. And most people who have been sick with the H1N1 flu have been taken care of at home and have fully recovered. People who have health problems are at higher risk for more severe illness, as are people with weakened immune systems. So far with the pandemic H1N1 flu, it seems that children less than 5 years of age, and especially those less than 2 years, may be at increased risk of more severe illness.

Also, the largest number of confirmed and probable cases is in people between the ages of 5 and 24 years. This is different when compared to those who usually are sick with seasonal flu. While this age group is getting sick with the H1N1 flu, most recover and get better unless they have health problems or weakened immune systems.

What should I do?

1. Get a season flu vaccine. The seasonal flu vaccine should be available at the beginning of September. Children ages 6 months to 18 years should get this flu vaccine every year. This year, since we will have both flu viruses circulating in our community, getting the seasonal flu vaccine will protect you from getting sick with seasonal flu.
2. A vaccine for the pandemic H1N1 flu will be available later in the fall, but there may be a limited supply at first. Recommendations for this vaccine include children and young adults 6 months to 24 years of age. The H1N1 vaccine will most likely require a booster shot 2 to 3 weeks after the first shot. For more information on pandemic H1N1 vaccine recommendations, go to <http://www.cdc.gov/h1n1flu/vaccination/acip.htm>
3. If your child becomes sick with flu symptoms (fever, cough, sore throat, runny nose), **keep your child at home until they no longer have a fever (without taking any medicine) for at least 24 hours.** If your child has other health issues, you may want to call your doctor for advice.
4. Teach your child good health habits by showing them how to cover cough and sneeze into their sleeves, or to cover their cough/sneeze with tissues. They should wash their hands often and keep their hands away from their faces. These simple tips will go a long way in limiting the spread of disease – especially if everyone cooperates!

Not everyone with flu symptoms may need to be seen by a health care provider or be tested for influenza. The best thing to do is to stay at home until you or your child is without a fever for at least 24 hours. But if you are worried that you or your child's symptoms are getting worse, be sure to contact your health care provider. As we learn more about the pandemic H1N1 flu, information may change. Be sure to watch for other notices from your child's school, or go to the Public Health Department web site at www.sccphd.org and look for pandemic H1N1 updates. If you have additional questions, you may call the Public Health Disease Prevention and Control Program at 408-885-4214 and ask to speak with a public health nurse.

Thank you for helping us keep our school community as healthy as possible.