

# PUBLIC HEALTH FACT SHEET

## H1N1 Flu (Swine Flu)

Massachusetts Department of Public Health

### 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. Symptoms 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. 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, muscle or nerve conditions that affect their breathing 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 - 4 days (usually 2 days) after a person breathes in the virus.

Flu is spread easily from person to person. The virus can also live for a short time 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.

### How is H1N1 flu treated?

There are drugs available that your doctor may prescribe to treat H1N1 flu. The drugs work best if started soon after the start of symptoms. Your doctor can determine if you need treatment.

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.

### Is there a vaccine for H1N1 flu?

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 people will need two shots of H1N1 vaccine, separated by 3 weeks or so. Getting flu vaccine will **not** give you the flu or any other type of illness.

## Who should get H1N1 flu vaccine?

Five groups have been identified by CDC to get this vaccine when it becomes available: pregnant women; people who live with or provide care for infants under 6 months of age (e.g., parents, siblings, and daycare providers); healthcare and emergency medical services personnel; people age 6 months to 24 years; and people 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.*

## 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 you do not 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.

## 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 regular 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. People with young children, a weak immune system or a chronic medical condition 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.

## 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).

## 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: <http://flu.masspro.org/>