



Protecting Your Family Against Severe Seasonal Flu and H1N1

Frank Esper, MD, University Hospitals Rainbow Babies & Children's Hospital Pediatric Infectious Disease Specialist says, "Influenza is the number one killer of people nationwide from an infection. Nothing, not Human Immunodeficiency Virus (HIV), Methicillin Resistant Staphylococcus Aureus (MRSA) or any diarrheal disease even comes close. Seasonal influenza holds the top spot.

"Every child between the ages of 6 months and 18 years old should be vaccinated for the flu annually," says Dr. Esper. "The flu shot may not keep you from getting the flu, but it does decrease transmission and help prevent hospitalization and severe disease like pneumonia and even death.

"When you get a flu vaccine, you are protecting yourself and everyone around you at home and at work," says Dr. Esper. "Immunization shortens the time you are contagious and minimizes your symptoms. To ensure maximum protection against seasonal influenza, you need a fresh vaccine each year.

"Influenza strains change year to year," he says. "As different strains emerge, we evaluate the most prominent ones and develop new vaccines.

"The 'H1N1' or 'Swine H1N1' is a total reinvention of influenza. It is a virus that we have never seen before," says Dr. Esper.

"The issue with this drastic of a change in influenza is that most people don't have any immunity to H1N1 and it is going to be extremely contagious. H1N1 is not necessarily more deadly than the seasonal influenza, but it is going to infect more people," he says.

"This year, your family will need multiple flu shots," says Dr. Esper. "One in early fall for the regular seasonal flu, and children over 10 and adults will need one H1N1 flu shot, while children under 10 will need two when they become available."

Dr. Esper recommends immunizing your family against the seasonal flu as soon as possible, between September and November.

"Get your flu shots prior to the 'Peak Wave' of influenza which typically occurs around December

or January." He adds that it is beneficial to get vaccinated at any point during flu season.

"You cannot get the flu from the flu shot – this is a common misconception. The flu shot is not a 'live virus' vaccine and does not cause the flu," he says. Typically, people contract a completely different virus – even prior to vaccination – and then blame the immunization for the symptoms.

Seasonal flu vaccines are available as a shot or a mist. Flu shots can be administered to babies and anyone 6 months or older. The nasal fluMist is recommended for healthy people ages 2 to 49 years of age who are not pregnant. In addition, it is now known that many children with egg allergy can tolerate the minor amount of egg protein found in flu vaccines. Under the supervision of an allergist/immunologist, skin testing can help parents determine whether or not their child is eligible for the vaccine.

With flu shots offered everywhere from your health club to the local drug store, it can be confusing where to get vaccinated. Dr. Esper recommends making an appointment with your family physician.

"Touch base with your doctor and your children's pediatrician in the fall. Your personal physician can discuss the specific benefits and risks of the flu vaccine as they relate to your family's specific health conditions," he says.

For the most current information on H1N1 and the vaccine, Dr. Esper suggests visiting the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) Web site at <http://www.cdc.gov/>.

"The CDC has readable updates on the local impact of the H1N1," he says. "Information comes out every day and constantly changes. It is important to stay informed."

Populations at increased risk for contracting serious illness from the seasonal flu include young children ages 5 and under, people over age 50 and patients with chronic medical conditions like asthma and cancer. In addition, pregnant women are more susceptible to serious illness and death resulting from the flu. The same groups are high risk for H1N1 complications along with *all* adults under age 24.

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Common influenza symptoms include high fever (103 degrees or above), cough and/or sore throat, a stuffy or runny nose, body aches, nausea, vomiting and fatigue. Diarrhea and vomiting often accompany the flu in children.

"The flu typically lasts three to five days," says Dr. Esper, "but can linger up to 10." According to Dr. Esper, patients with conditions like asthma or Chronic Obstructive Pulmonary Disease (COPD) may battle the flu for longer periods of time.

Patients in high-risk groups may be treated with antiviral drugs which typically make symptoms go away a day or two early. "We are starting to see resistance to antivirals so even these prescriptive medications may eventually become ineffective against the flu," says Dr. Esper.

Flu patients may also find some relief from over-the-counter products like Tylenol or Motrin, but the best treatment for any type of flu includes plenty of bed rest and fluid intake. "Chicken soup is still a good standby," says Dr. Esper. "The vast majority of people infected with seasonal flu or H1N1 are going to have mild disease," he says.

However, if someone in your family has a prolonged fever of more than three days or symptoms that cause concern, you should call your pediatrician or family physician.

"With the flu, I always recommend calling your doctor first, before making an office visit," he says. "Don't risk exposing others to your child's illness or your family to additional germs when most questions about influenza can be handled over the phone."

Dr. Esper cautions that there are severe flu symptoms that warrant an emergency room visit including:

- Rapid breathing to the point that the patient cannot string three or four words together, taking a breath between each word
- An inability to tolerate any liquids
- Signs of dehydration like lack of tears or urine
- A bluish color of the lips or fingernails
- A patient who is hard to wake or who is unresponsive

Flu prevention and containment rests in the simple guidelines of washing hands often as the virus is spread from hand-to-mouth contact and minimizing its impact by getting vaccinated.

Dr. Esper says this is the year to treat illnesses with a heavier hand and abide by strict guidelines.

"If you're sick, stay home. If your child is sick, keep her home from school until she is fever-free for 24 hours after her fever breaks without the use of Tylenol or Motrin.

"Prepare in advance for the possibility of three to five day periods of staying home. Have extended family members or people 'on call' in case your child does get sick and you need backup for work," he advises.

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**If you think you, or a member
of your family, may be at risk,
please call the University Hospitals
H1N1 [Swine] Flu HOTLINE 216-844-7246.**