



## Federal Occupational Health Provides Answers to Frequently Asked Questions on the H1N1 Influenza Virus

### **Q: What is an influenza pandemic?**

**A:** A pandemic is a global disease outbreak. Pandemics can be caused by many diseases – the plague, yellow fever and HIV/AIDS, are some examples. An influenza pandemic occurs when a new influenza virus emerges for which there is little or no immunity in the human population, begins to cause serious illness, and then spreads easily person-to-person worldwide.

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### **Q: What is H1N1 flu?**

**A:** H1N1 influenza is caused by a Type A influenza virus. This new virus was first detected in people in the United States in April 2009 and has spread rapidly throughout the world. This virus is spreading from person-to-person, probably in much the same way that regular seasonal influenza viruses spread.

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### **Q: How does H1N1 flu differ from regular seasonal flu?**

**A:** Because the H1N1 influenza outbreak involves a strain that is new, most people have little or no immunity to it, unlike the seasonal flu. However, the symptoms of novel H1N1 influenza virus in people are similar to the [symptoms of seasonal flu](http://www.cdc.gov/flu/about/disease/symptoms.htm) << [www.cdc.gov/flu/about/disease/symptoms.htm](http://www.cdc.gov/flu/about/disease/symptoms.htm) >> (such as fever, chills, cough, sore throat, and muscle aches).

Notably, a significant number of people who have been infected with this virus have reported diarrhea and vomiting. Also, like seasonal flu, severe illnesses and death have occurred as a result of this virus. However, the vast majority of cases are mild to moderate and resolve without any treatment.

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**Q: Will the flu shots from last fall help protect us?**

**A:** Because the H1N1 virus is new, public health officials believe there is little if any protection from last year's seasonal flu vaccine.

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**Q: Has FOH taken any special precautions to prevent the spread of the H1N1 flu?**

**A:** FOH is monitoring the recent outbreak of H1N1 influenza as it spreads throughout the United States, as well as the Southern Hemisphere as peak flu season approaches. FOH has worked with many agencies to help educate their managers and employees on ways to reduce transmission and we have also established "infection control" stations near entrances of FOH clinics to promote hand hygiene and use of face masks for those with respiratory symptoms. Finally, the FOH Medical Director and other staff are collaborating with the CDC and other officials to secure supplies of H1N1 influenza vaccine as soon as they become available.

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**Q: Will FOH distribute masks to employees?**

**A:** According to medical experts, surgical masks are beneficial only for those people who have [been diagnosed with the flu](http://www.cdc.gov/h1n1flu/masks.htm#table2) << [www.cdc.gov/h1n1flu/masks.htm#table2](http://www.cdc.gov/h1n1flu/masks.htm#table2) >> or other respiratory viruses as a way to prevent them from spreading germs when they cough. FOH is providing such masks only to those with symptoms who enter FOH health centers for evaluation.

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**Q: Do you know when we will have H1N1 vaccines available from the FOH Health Unit or elsewhere?**

**A:** H1N1 vaccine is currently in development. Testing to determine the vaccine's effectiveness is planned for August 2009. Initial supplies of the vaccine may be available as early as October 2009, but it is too soon to tell when FOH health units will receive supplies.

It is expected that any H1N1 vaccine will first be given to [high risk groups identified by the CDC](http://www.cdc.gov/vaccines/spec-grps/default.htm) << [www.cdc.gov/vaccines/spec-grps/default.htm](http://www.cdc.gov/vaccines/spec-grps/default.htm) >> (such as healthcare workers, and emergency first responders). It is important to note that priority groups for an H1N1 vaccine may vary from those for seasonal flu vaccine because of the differences in the

spread and risk of complications from the disease. Also, it is likely that two doses of the new vaccine will be needed to provide the best immunity.

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**Q: What about Tamiflu? What is the effectiveness of Tamiflu and other antiviral medications?**

**A:** [Antiviral medications](#) << [www.cdc.gov/h1n1flu/antiviral.htm#c](http://www.cdc.gov/h1n1flu/antiviral.htm#c) >> Oseltamivir (brand name Tamiflu ®) and zanamivir (brand name Relenza ®) are currently effective for the treatment and prevention of most cases of H1N1 influenza. However, there have been recent reports of resistance to oseltamivir by some H1N1 strains.

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**Q: How does H1N1 flu spread?**

**A:** Health officials believe it [spreads](#) <<[www.pandemicflu.gov/plan/individual/panfacts.html](http://www.pandemicflu.gov/plan/individual/panfacts.html)>> much like the regular seasonal flu – through droplets left behind when people who are sick cough and sneeze. The germs spread when someone inhales the droplets or touches a contaminated surface with droplets on it and then touches his or her face.

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**Q: How long are people contagious?**

**A:** It is believed that infected people are contagious beginning 1 day before symptoms occur and up to 7 days after becoming sick, or until the symptoms are gone.

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**Q: What should I do to keep from getting the flu?**

**A:** Wash hands frequently, especially in these situations:

- Before eating or preparing foods.
- After coughing, sneezing, or blowing your nose.
- After touching surfaces of common areas that may be contaminated with the flu virus.
- After using the restroom or changing a soiled diaper.
- Before and after tending to someone who is sick.
- After handling an animal, animal waste, or garbage.
- Before and after treating a wound.

Avoid touching nose, mouth, and face, especially with unwashed hands. Avoid close contact with people who are sick. Also, guard your health. Get plenty of sleep, manage your stress, and eat a nutritious well-balanced diet.

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**Q: What is the best way to keep from spreading the virus through coughing or sneezing?**

**A:** If you are sick, stay home and limit your contact with other people as much as possible. Do not go to work if you are ill. [Cover your mouth and nose](#) <<[www.cdc.gov/flu/protect/covercough.htm](http://www.cdc.gov/flu/protect/covercough.htm)>> with a tissue when coughing or sneezing – or cough/sneeze into your sleeve (not your hands) – it may prevent those around you from getting sick. Put your used tissue in the waste basket. Then, clean your hands, and do so every time you cough or sneeze. The [CDC](#) << [www.cdc.gov/h1n1flu/sick.htm](http://www.cdc.gov/h1n1flu/sick.htm) >> has more information on what to do if you are sick.

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

**A:** Washing your hands often will help protect you from germs. Wash with soap and water or clean with at least 60% alcohol-based hand cleaner. When you wash your hands with soap and warm water, do so for 15 to 20 seconds. When soap and water are not available, use alcohol-based disposable hand wipes or gel sanitizers. If using gel, rub your hands until the gel is dry – the alcohol in the gel kills the germs on your hands.

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**Q: Can H1N1 Flu re-infection occur?**

**A:** After an illness, the human body produces antibodies that offer a level of protection from being re-infected from viruses. However, since influenza viruses are constantly mutating, if you are exposed to a different strain of the same virus, it is possible that you could get sick again.

Studies are ongoing about how the H1N1 influenza virus in particular is transmitted and the likelihood of being re-infected. Until more is known, consider some tips:

- If you become ill, give yourself enough time to fully recover.
- Frequent hand washing and use of alcohol-based hand cleaners cuts down exposure and re-exposure to contagions.
- [Keep surfaces clean](#) << [www.cdc.gov/h1n1flu/guidance\\_homecare.htm#d](http://www.cdc.gov/h1n1flu/guidance_homecare.htm#d) >> with disinfectant cleaners.

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**Q: How long does the H1N1 virus live on common surfaces like elevator buttons and doorknobs? I'm worried about contamination on surfaces that everyone touches in my office building. What can be done to minimize exposure?**

**A:** One study showed that the influenza virus can survive on environmental surfaces and can infect a person for up to [2-8 hours](#) << [www.cdc.gov/H1N1flu/ga.htm#e](http://www.cdc.gov/H1N1flu/ga.htm#e) >> after being deposited on the surface, depending on temperature and humidity. **This is why it is important to follow hand hygiene practices.**

Keeping hand sanitizers (or wipes) in common workplace areas such as lobbies, corridors, and maintaining soap supplies and towels in restrooms are steps that can be taken to facilitate good hygiene. In addition, regularly disinfecting commonly-touched hard surfaces in the workplace, such as counter tops, door knobs, and bathroom surfaces by wiping them down with an EPA registered disinfectant according to directions on the product label can reduce the chance of spread of germs including the A (H1N1) influenza virus according to the CDC.

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Contact FOH for assistance and consultation on this and other occupational health issues. For additional general information on H1N1 flu visit the CDC Web site: <http://www.cdc.gov/swineflu>.

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### **FOH, the Occupational Health Provider of Choice for the Federal Government**

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Federal agencies throughout the U.S. and overseas can access FOH services. FOH provides worksite health services, Wellness/Fitness, Employee Assistance Programs (EAP), Work/Life, Environmental Health and Safety, Organizational Development, and Training and Education.

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