



What is influenza?

Influenza (often called “flu”) is a contagious disease caused by the influenza virus. Symptoms include sudden fever, cough, muscle aches, headache, runny nose, sore throat and general weakness. Flu may also cause diarrhea and vomiting in some people. These symptoms can range from mild to severe.

What is 2009 H1N1 flu?

2009 H1N1 flu, known as “swine flu” early on, is a new strain of flu virus. 2009 H1N1 flu is spread the same way, causes the same symptoms and is treated the same way as seasonal flu. The main difference between seasonal flu and 2009 H1N1 flu is that most people do not have immunity or protection against 2009 H1N1 since this is a new strain of flu. Since few people have protection against 2009 H1N1 flu, more people could become sick with this type of flu.

Is flu dangerous?

It can be, particularly for the very young, the very old and those with underlying medical problems. Most people have mild illness lasting a few days; however, some may develop pneumonia or other serious complications. Every year, flu causes thousands of hospital admissions in the United States.

How is flu spread?

The viruses that cause flu live in the nose and throat and are sprayed into the air when an infected person sneezes, coughs, or talks. People nearby can then breathe in the virus. Flu symptoms usually start 1 to 3 days after a person breathes in the virus. An infected person is most contagious 1 day before symptoms begin until 4 days afterward; however, some adults and children are able to spread the virus longer.

Who should get flu vaccine?

Flu vaccine is the best way to prevent the flu. There are two types of vaccines available; one is a shot given in the arm and the other is a spray given in the nose. A person needs to get a seasonal flu vaccine every year to be protected. Seasonal flu vaccine is expected to be in good supply in 2009. Anyone who wants to avoid getting sick with the flu should get a seasonal flu vaccine every year. Those particularly susceptible to the flu, including pregnant women, all children older than 6 months of age, persons with underlying medical problems, the elderly, persons who live in long term care facilities, those who take care of persons at high risk from influenza (such as infants under 6 months of age and healthcare workers), should get seasonal flu vaccine. Flu vaccine cannot give someone flu, but it takes two weeks after getting vaccinated to be protected. Be sure to take other precautions against getting the flu during this time.

It is important to remember that the seasonal flu vaccine will not protect against 2009 H1N1 flu. The 2009 H1N1 flu vaccine should be available in mid to late fall. It is not known how much 2009 H1N1 vaccine will be available, and initial supplies are expected to be given to those at most risk for 2009 H1N1 (pregnant women, children six months or older, adults with underlying medical problems, and healthcare or emergency medical workers). Based on information from 2009 H1N1 cases to date, the elderly are not considered to be at high risk for 2009 H1N1. Additional 2009 H1N1 vaccine is expected to be available for other groups later in the season.

Should I get a flu shot or a flu spray vaccine?

You should talk with a healthcare provider about which vaccine is best for you. In general, the flu shot is available for anyone over 6 months of age who has not had a severe allergic reaction to any part of the vaccine (such as eggs), or to a previous dose of flu vaccine. Anyone with a history of Guillain-Barré syndrome (a rare neurological problem) should talk with their doctor before getting a flu vaccine.

The flu spray (sometimes called LAIV for “Live Attenuated Influenza Vaccine”) is made with live, weakened flu viruses that do not cause the flu. The spray, given in the nose, is an option for healthy people 2 through 49 years of age who are not pregnant.

How can I prevent the spread of flu?

There are many ways you can help to prevent the spread of germs.

- Cover your nose and mouth with a tissue every time you cough or sneeze. Then throw the used tissue in a waste basket. If you don't have a tissue, sneeze or cough into your upper sleeve.
- Clean your hands often with soap and water or an alcohol-based hand cleaner.
- Stay home when you are sick. It is recommended that you stay at home for 24 hours after your fever has gone away (without medications to reduce the fever). *For most people, this means staying home for at least four days; returning to public activities before this time may spread infection to others.* Avoid close contact with people who are sick, if possible.

What should I do if I get the flu?

Generally, the flu lasts 3 to 7 days. Drink plenty of fluids and get a lot of rest. Medication such as acetaminophen or ibuprofen can be used to help relieve a fever. Be sure to follow package directions for the age of the person taking the medicine. Do not give aspirin to children due to the risk of Reye's Syndrome, a rare but serious illness. Decongestants may help relieve a stuffy nose or sinus pressure in adults and children over 4 years. Talk to your doctor if symptoms seem severe or ongoing.

Are there any medications that I can take?

Antiviral medicines are most often recommended for persons at high risk of developing complications from the flu. These medicines must be prescribed by a doctor. These medicines are most effective if started within 48 hours of symptom onset. These drugs can reduce the symptoms of the flu and shorten the time you are sick by 1 to 2 days.

**For more information, please contact
Boston Public Health Commission
Mayor's Health Line
(617) 534-5050 or www.bphc.org**