

H1N1 (Swine) Influenza

What is H1N1 influenza A?

The new H1N1 influenza, also called swine flu, is a new influenza virus causing illness in people. This new virus was first detected in 2009.

This virus has been called swine flu because it was thought to have come from pigs. However, the virus contains genes from swine, avian (bird), and human influenza viruses. It is considered to be a new virus and is called new or novel H1N1 flu. Because H1N1 flu is caused by a new virus, people generally have little or no immunity and protection against it. This means it may be easier to get sick from the virus.

How does it occur?

This new virus spreads from person to person the same way regular flu spreads--mainly through coughing or sneezing by someone infected with the virus. Touching something with the flu virus on it and then touching your mouth, nose, or eyes may also cause infection.

You can pass the flu on to someone else before you know you are sick and while you are sick. You can pass it on even after you feel better. People with H1N1 flu are contagious from 1 day before they start having symptoms to 7 days after the start of symptoms. Children might be contagious for a few more days.

The virus is not spread by food. Properly handled and cooked pork products are safe to eat.

What are the symptoms?

The symptoms of new H1N1 flu are similar to the symptoms of regular flu. They include:

- fever of 100° F (37.7° C) or higher
- cough
- sore throat
- runny or stuffy nose
- body aches
- headache
- chills
- tiredness

Some people with new H1N1 flu also have diarrhea and vomiting.

Babies and young children may have fever and no energy (lethargy). They may be sick even though they do not have a cough or sore throat.

Call your healthcare provider if you have symptoms of the flu and:

- You have heart disease, asthma, chronic bronchitis, kidney disease, diabetes, or another chronic medical problem.
- Your immune system does not work normally (for example, because you are taking steroids for another medical problem).
- Your symptoms become more severe, you have a painful cough, you are coughing up phlegm, or you are having trouble breathing.

How is it diagnosed?

New H1N1 flu is diagnosed from the symptoms, a physical exam, and a history of possible exposure. Your healthcare provider will want to know if you have traveled to an area where people have been sick with the flu.

Samples of discharge from the nose can be tested for the H1N1 virus.

How is it treated?

If you live in an area where people have had new H1N1 flu and you become ill with flulike symptoms, you should stay home and avoid contact with other people except to get medical care. If you are concerned about mild symptoms, call your healthcare provider. Do not go to the office or clinic without calling first. In many cases you can manage the symptoms at home.

The antiviral drugs oseltamivir (Tamiflu[®]) or zanamivir (Relenza[®]) may be prescribed for the treatment or prevention of infection with the new H1N1 flu virus. These medicines fight against the flu by keeping flu viruses from making more viruses in the body. If you get sick, antiviral drugs can make your illness milder and make you feel better faster. They may also prevent serious flu complications. These medicines work best if they are started within the first 2 days of symptoms.

During an outbreak affecting a lot of people, there may be a limited supply of antiviral medicines. In this case, the drugs may be used only for people who have severe influenza illness or who may have been exposed to the virus and have a high risk of complications if they get the flu.

How long will the effects last?

Flu symptoms usually last 3 to 7 days.

Infection with the flu virus often leads to other infections, such as ear, sinus, and bronchial infections. Pneumonia can also occur as a result of the flu. It can be caused by the flu virus itself or by bacteria invading lung tissues that have been damaged by the virus.

Like the regular flu, new H1N1 flu has caused some people to become very sick. It has caused some deaths. It is not yet known how severe the effects of this virus will be in the general population. Scientists are studying the virus to learn more about it.

How can I take care of myself?

To take care of yourself at home:

- Stay home for 7 days after you first start getting sick and until the fever is gone. If you need to leave home for medical care, cover your nose and mouth when you cough or sneeze. Wear a loose-fitting surgical or dental facemask if available. Notify healthcare workers as soon as you arrive that you may have new H1N1 influenza, so they can protect themselves and others around you.
- Get plenty of rest.
- Drink a lot of liquids. Water, juice, and noncaffeinated drinks are best.
- Consider taking acetaminophen or ibuprofen to relieve headaches and muscle aches and to lower a fever. Children under 18 years of age should not take aspirin or products containing salicylate (such as Pepto-Bismol) because of the risk of Reye's syndrome, unless recommended by a healthcare provider.
- If your nose or sinuses become congested, a decongestant medicine may help you feel better. It may help prevent ear or sinus infections.
- Antihistamine medicine can be helpful if a runny nose is making it hard for you to sleep. However, antihistamine has a very drying effect and may cause the mucus in your nose, throat, and lungs to become thick and dry.
- Adults may take cough medicine to help control a cough. Do not give a child under age 4 any cough and cold medicines unless you are specifically instructed to do so by your healthcare provider. These medicines may be dangerous in young children. Children over 6 years old may be given cough drops or hard candies to relieve a sore throat or cough.

The safest care for flu symptoms in children under 2 is a cool-mist humidifier and a suction bulb to help clear away mucus.

How can I help prevent the new H1N1 flu?

There is no flu shot against the new H1N1 flu virus. Health officials are working to develop one.

Here are some ways to help prevent the spread of flu:

If you are sick, you can help protect others by:

- Covering your nose and mouth with a tissue when you cough or sneeze. Throw the tissue in the trash after you use it, and then clean your hands.
- Cleaning your hands with soap and water or an alcohol-based hand rub often, especially after using tissues or coughing or sneezing into your hands.

- Staying home from work or school. Limit contact with others so you don't infect them. Keep your children home from daycare or school if they are sick. Families of sick people should consider staying at home until they are sure they will not get sick, too (about 1 week).
- Wearing a face mask to help decrease the chance you will infect others.

To avoid getting the flu from someone else:

- Wash your hands often with soap and water. Wash for 20 seconds (long enough to sing the whole "Happy Birthday" song) or use an alcohol-based hand cleaner.
- Avoid touching your eyes, nose, or mouth.
- Avoid close contact with people who are sick. Stay at least 6 feet away if you can.
- Try to stay in good health. Get plenty of sleep, be physically active, manage your stress, drink plenty of fluids, and eat healthy food.
- In areas where new H1N1 flu has occurred, consider staying away from shopping malls, movie theaters, or other places where there are a lot of people.
- If you have to be in a crowded setting, spend as little time there as possible.
- Keep surfaces (especially bedside tables, surfaces in the bathroom, and toys for children) clean. Some viruses and bacteria can live 2 hours or more on surfaces like cafeteria tables, doorknobs, and desks. Wipe them down with a household disinfectant according to directions on the label.
- You don't need to clean a sick person's linens, eating utensils, cups, and dishes separately, but don't share them without washing them first.
- Wash linens like clothes, bed sheets and towels with laundry soap and tumble dry on a hot setting. Don't "hug" laundry before you wash it. Clean your hands right after handling dirty laundry.
- Wash eating utensils in a dishwasher or by hand with warm water and soap.

It has not been shown that face masks will keep you from getting the flu if you are around others who have the flu. Face masks are more useful if they are worn by people who are sick, to keep them from spreading the virus.

When should I seek emergency medical care?

If a child has any of the following warning signs, get emergency medical care:

- fast breathing or trouble breathing
- bluish skin color
- not waking up or not interacting with others
- being so irritable that they don't want to be held
- fever with a rash

Adults should seek emergency medical care for:

- trouble breathing or shortness of breath
- pain or pressure in the chest or belly
- sudden dizziness
- confusion
- severe vomiting or vomiting that doesn't stop

For more information contact the Centers for Disease Control or visit their Web site at http://www.cdc.gov/h1n1flu/general_info.htm.