



**NEW YORK CITY DEPARTMENT OF HEALTH
AND MENTAL HYGIENE**
Thomas R. Frieden, MD, MPH
Commissioner

H1N1 Flu: What New Yorkers Need to Know

What is H1N1 Influenza?

H1N1 influenza (“swine flu”) is caused by a new virus that recently emerged in Mexico and the United States and has spread throughout the world. H1N1 flu is typically mild, but it can cause severe illness and death in some people.

How is the H1N1 influenza virus spread?

Like any flu virus, H1N1 is spread mainly through respiratory droplets that are released when an infected person coughs or sneezes. People in close proximity to the infected person (about 3 feet) can become infected if these droplets contact the mouth or nose. Influenza viruses may also spread when a person touches respiratory droplets on another person or object, and then touches his or her own mouth or nose.

How long is a person with H1N1 flu contagious?

The contagious period varies but is thought to be less than 7 days in most cases. The Health Department advises people with flu-like illness to stay home until their fever and symptoms completely resolve and they have felt well for 24 hours.

What are the symptoms of H1N1 influenza?

H1N1 influenza symptoms resemble those of seasonal flu: fever accompanied by cough, sore throat, fatigue, headache, body aches, lethargy, stuffy nose or chills. Some affected people have also reported diarrhea and vomiting.

How severe is H1N1 influenza?

So far, we have no evidence that H1N1 influenza is any more, or less, severe than seasonal flu. While most cases are mild and most people recover quickly without medical treatment, hospitalizations are increasing as the overall number of cases increases. The Health Department monitors reports of severe illness and provides regular updates at <http://www.nyc.gov/health>.

Who is at greater risk for complications of H1N1 influenza?

Infants, toddlers, seniors and pregnant women are at increased risk of severe illness or complications from influenza. So are people with certain underlying health conditions (see list below). If you or a family member meet one of these definitions, and you develop flu-like illness (fever accompanied by cough or sore throat), please call your doctor or clinic to discuss treatment with antiviral medicine.

Those at higher risk of flu complications include:

- People over 65 or under 2 years of age
- Pregnant women
- People with chronic lung problems, such as asthma or emphysema

- People with chronic heart, kidney, liver or blood disorders
- People with neurological disorders that can cause breathing problems
- People with diabetes
- People whose immune systems are weakened due to illness or medication
- People under 18 years who are on long-term aspirin therapy

How can I protect myself from H1N1 influenza?

Here are the best ways to avoid getting or spreading H1N1 flu. The same precautions can help prevent seasonal flu and many other respiratory infections:

- Try to avoid close contact with people who have an influenza-like illness.
- If you need to have close contact with someone who has an influenza-like illness, take steps to keep it from spreading. For tips on reducing household transmission, see www.nyc.gov/html/doh/downloads/pdf/cd/cd-h1n1flu-homeisolation-new.pdf.
- Wash your hands often with soap and warm water. If your hands are not visibly soiled, you can use a hand cleaner containing 60% to 95% alcohol.
- Avoid touching your nose, mouth or eyes, and wash your hands thoroughly before doing so.
- If your age or health status increases your risk of complications from flu (see list above), and you have been in close contact with someone who has flu like-illness, call your doctor or clinic to see if you should take medication to *prevent* influenza.

Should people at risk of complications take medicine to prevent H1N1 flu?

Antiviral medicine can help prevent H1N1 infection in people at high risk of developing severe illness. The Health Department does not recommend preventive treatment except in people who have known risk factors (see list above) and who are in close contact with people who have flu-like illness.

What should I do if I develop flu-like illness?

If you develop a fever, accompanied by cough or sore throat, you can take steps to protect yourself and avoid spreading illness to others.

- If you have a severe or worsening symptoms, such as difficulty breathing, go immediately to a hospital emergency room. If you do not have severe illness, there is *no* need to go to a hospital, and nothing to be gained from it.
- If you are at risk of complications (see list above), call your doctor to discuss treatment with antiviral medicine. You may not need to visit the doctor's office or clinic; if appropriate, the doctor can call a pharmacy with your prescription.
- People with flu usually recover without medical treatment. But other illnesses can cause fever, so call your doctor if you are in doubt.
- Rest, drink plenty of liquids, and take the medications you would normally take to treat your symptoms (for example, acetaminophen or ibuprofen). People under 18 years old should not take aspirin or aspirin-containing products such as Pepto-Bismol™. Aspirin can cause a rare but serious illness called Reye's syndrome in young people with flu.
- Avoid spreading the flu to others by covering your nose and mouth with a tissue when you cough, sneeze or blow your nose, and washing your hands frequently.

How can I help prevent the spread of H1N1 influenza?

- Stay at home until your symptoms resolve. Do not return to work or school until you have been well for at least 24 hours.
- Cover your mouth and nose whenever you cough or sneeze. Cough or sneeze into a handkerchief or tissue. If you don't have one, use your sleeve instead of your bare hand. Throw your used tissue into a wastebasket, preferably one with a cover.
- Wash your hands often with soap and water. If your hands are not visibly soiled, you can use an alcohol-based hand cleaner. Don't touch phones, doorknobs or other shared items before washing your hands. Use your own towel or disposable towels to dry your hands.
- Stay in a separate room and limit your contact with others in your home. Consider wearing a surgical mask when other people are nearby. A surgical mask is a soft fabric mask that covers the nose and mouth to prevent germs from spreading. Anyone can get one at a pharmacy or hardware store.
- Don't share food, drink, or toothbrushes with others in your home.
- Don't share dishes, glasses or eating utensils until they have been washed.

Should I be tested for H1N1 influenza?

There is no need for people with mild illness to be tested for influenza. Testing does not affect treatment or medical advice. The Health Department tests people for the H1N1 virus only when investigating a cluster of infections or a case of severe illness.

Do I need medicine to treat mild illness?

People with mild illness who also are older than 65, younger than age 2, are pregnant, or have certain underlying medical conditions should take the antiviral medicines Tamiflu® (oseltamivir) and Relenza™ (zanamivir) to treat H1N1 flu symptoms. If you have one of the underlying medical conditions listed above, and you develop flu-like illness, call your doctor to get treatment. Other people with mild flu-like illness do not need treatment with antiviral medicines. Most flu lasts only a few days, and most people recover completely without medication, so use antiviral medicine only if your doctor recommends and prescribes it for you.

Who should go to the emergency room or hospital?

Go immediately to a hospital emergency room if you have severe or worsening illness. If you go to the emergency room, travel by private car or taxi, not by bus or subway.

In adults, the signs of severe or worsening illness include:

- Rapid breathing, difficulty breathing or shortness of breath
- Pain or pressure in the chest or abdomen
- Bluish skin color
- Dizziness or confusion
- Increasing fever
- Severe or persistent vomiting

In children, the signs of severe or worsening illness include:

- Increased fever
- Rash

- Rapid or difficult breathing
- Bluish skin color
- Irritability
- Lack of responsiveness (not waking up or not interacting)
- Not drinking enough fluids

If you call 911 for emergency medical assistance, tell the operator that you have symptoms of influenza. You should also tell the ambulance crew and the nurse in the emergency room. You may be asked to sit in a separate area and wear a mask while waiting to be seen.

Who should *not* go to the emergency room or hospital?

- Do not go to the emergency room for mild flu-like illness if you have no underlying medical condition.
- If you develop mild flu-like illness and you also have an underlying medical condition, call your doctor to discuss treatment. You may not need to visit the doctor’s office or clinic; if appropriate, the doctor can call a pharmacy with your prescription.

What should I do if someone in my home has the flu?

If you are not caring for the person who is sick, limit your contact as much as possible. If you are taking care of the person,

- Make sure the person has plenty of tissues and a wastebasket for disposal.
- Make sure soap and warm water are available for hand-washing.
- Encourage the person to remain in his or her room while sick. The person should avoid touching others until 24 hours after the symptoms resolve.
- If possible, choose one person to be the primary caregiver and have that person bring meals and other necessities into the person’s room. If this is not possible, encourage the person to wear a surgical mask when around others.
- Consider wearing a mask yourself when you are within 3 feet of the person – for example, when helping adjust the person’s position in bed or helping with feeding or personal hygiene. Masks can be washed with normal laundry detergent and tumble-dried in a hot dryer.
- If you handle the sick person’s laundry, wash it with household laundry detergent and tumble dry it on a hot setting. Avoid holding dirty laundry near your face, and clean your hands after handling it. It’s not necessary to separate a sick person’s laundry from other household laundry.

What other precautions are needed in a home where someone has the flu?

- Limit visitors if possible. Tell friends and family members that someone is sick, and ask that they delay visiting until the person has recovered.
- Household members should monitor themselves closely for flu-like symptoms. If they get sick with fever and cough, they should stay at home and take the precautions listed above to avoid infecting others: cover coughs and sneezes with a tissue, wash hands frequently, and limit direct contact with others.
- For more information, see the Health Department’s home-isolation guide at www.nyc.gov/html/doh/downloads/pdf/cd/cd-h1n1flu-homeisolation-new.pdf.

What should I use to clean household surfaces?

- Cleaning is less important than covering coughs and frequent hand washing, but it may help. Household cleaners, or soap and water, are usually adequate. Household disinfectants may offer extra protection on frequently contacted surfaces such as telephones, doorknobs, refrigerator door handles bathroom surfaces and children’s toys. If hard surfaces are visibly dirty, clean them before applying a disinfectant and rinsing. Additional information on registered disinfectants and antimicrobial products is available at www.epa.gov/oppad001/influenza-disinfectants.html and [www.nyhealth.gov/diseases/communicable/influenza/seasonal/swine flu/cleaning and disinfectants.htm](http://www.nyhealth.gov/diseases/communicable/influenza/seasonal/swine_flu/cleaning_and_disinfectants.htm).
- Never mix bleach with cleaning products – the mixture may create hazardous vapors. If you don’t have a disinfectant, use a chlorine bleach solution made by adding 1 tablespoon of bleach to a quart (4 cups) of water. Discard bleach solution after you use it.

If I live with someone who has flu-like illness, can I go to work or school?

Yes, but anyone who starts to feel ill at work or school should return home right away, and follow the precautions described above for people with fever and cough.

Should I send my children to school?

- Healthy children do not need to miss school unless classes are canceled. You can find out if your school is closing by visiting <http://schools.nyc.gov/Home/Spotlight/closures.htm>.
- See www.nyc.gov/html/doh/html/cd/cd-h1n1flu-educators.shtml for H1N1 information for parents, teachers, and principals.
- Children who develop fever or respiratory illness should be kept home until they have recovered and felt well for 24 hours.

If a school is closed to slow the spread of flu, do students or staff need to take any specific precautions?

- Students and staff should monitor themselves for signs of flu-like illness. Students and staff that have mild flu-like illness (fever AND cough or sore throat) and have underlying conditions that place them at high risk for complications from the flu (see list above) should call their doctor to get treatment.
- Students and staff who are not sick but who have underlying conditions that place them at high risk for complications from the flu (see list above) and who attend or work at a school that has been closed due to high or increasing rates of flu-like illness should call their doctor to determine if they need to take medicine to help prevent flu.

What if an employer or school demands a negative flu test to let me or my child return after an illness?

You should not need testing to return to work or school. If a school or employer demands testing, refer them to information on the Health Department website (www.nyc.gov/health).

Is there a vaccine for H1N1 flu?

There is currently no vaccine against H1N1 flu, and vaccination against seasonal flu does not prevent H1N1 flu. This makes it very important to take precautions such as covering coughs and washing hands, which can help prevent any kind of flu.

Is it safe to travel?

The Center for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) has lifted its recommendation against non-essential travel to Mexico. The CDC's "Travel Health Precaution is available at wwwn.cdc.gov/travel/content/travel-health-precaution/novel-h1n1-flu-mexico.aspx.

What if I understand the facts but still feel anxious about flu?

When dealing with a stressful situation, you and your family may feel anxious. Remember to take care of your emotional health. Being home and not feeling well can be very stressful. Here are some tips for managing your stress:

- Stay connected to family, friends and social groups by telephone and e-mail.
- Obtain essential information on the outbreak to ease your anxiety, but avoid watching report after report about the outbreak. The repetition can be distressing, especially for children. Parents should limit children's news watching. Watch the news with your children and tell them what is going on.
- If you get sick, understand that recovering from flu takes time and patience. Don't be afraid to ask for help.

People who feel overwhelmed by stress or fear can seek help by calling Lifenet, a 24 hour, 7-days-a-week crisis hotline. LifeNet is staffed by mental-health professionals who speak a variety of languages.

- English: 800-LIFENET (800-543-3638)
- Spanish: 877-AYUDESE (877-298-33730)
- Asian languages: 877-990-8585
- Deaf/Hearing Impaired (TTY): 212-982-5284 or www.mhaofnyc.org.

For facts about influenza, and more information about H1N1 flu, please visit the Health Department and CDC websites. Some specific resources:

From New York City Health Department

www.nyc.gov/html/doh/html/cd/cd-h1n1flu.shtml

From Centers for Disease Control and Prevention

www.cdc.gov/h1n1flu/general_info.htm

Updated May 26, 2009