

Frequently Asked Questions About H1N1 Influenza (Swine Flu) Vaccine

WHO SHOULD GET THE H1N1 INFLUENZA VACCINE

Why should I get the H1N1 influenza (swine flu) vaccine?

Influenza vaccine provides the best protection against influenza infections. Vaccination stimulates the body's ability to fight influenza and is particularly important for people at high risk for serious illness due to flu and their close contacts.

Although most healthy people who get H1N1 influenza have an uncomplicated illness lasting about a week, young children, pregnant women, and people with certain chronic medical conditions (see below) are at increased risk for severe illness including hospitalization and death. Even a mild case of the flu can be very uncomfortable and result in missed days of work and school. In addition, if there are fewer people who have the flu in the community, it helps protect against the spread of flu to those who are at greater risk of serious illness.

Who will get the H1N1 influenza vaccine first?

To protect those who are at highest risk from severe illness from H1N1 influenza, the first supplies of H1N1 vaccine will be given to people in the following groups:

- Pregnant women
- People who live with or care for children younger than 6 months of age
- People between the ages of 6 months and 24 years old
- People ages of 25 through 64 years of age who are at higher risk for severe H1N1 because of chronic health conditions (such as asthma, heart disease, diabetes, or brain/nervous system disorders) or weakened immune systems
- Healthcare and emergency medical services personnel will also be in the first group vaccinated because 1) they are at high risk for infection 2) they need to stay well so they don't pass flu to patients, and 3) we need to make sure our healthcare system is able to handle a larger than usual number of patients during an H1N1 outbreak.

Will there be enough vaccine for everyone?

Yes, there will be enough eventually. Currently there is a national delay in the production of H1N1 vaccine, so certain groups (such as pregnant women, healthcare workers, and people with chronic health conditions) will be given priority for vaccination in order to protect those who are at highest risk from severe illness if they get the flu. However, vaccine supply will gradually increase and in the coming weeks, it is expected to be widely available to anyone who wants it.

Should pregnant women get the H1N1 vaccine?

Yes. It is very important for a pregnant woman to get the H1N1 influenza vaccine as well as a seasonal influenza vaccine. A pregnant woman who gets any type of flu is at risk for serious health complications and hospitalization. In comparison to the rest of general public, a greater proportion of pregnant women infected with the H1N1 influenza virus have been hospitalized. In addition, severe illness and death from H1N1 has occurred in pregnant women, even those who were previously healthy. While hand washing, staying away from ill people, and other steps can help to protect pregnant women from influenza, vaccination is the single best way to protect against the flu.

Is there a particular kind of flu vaccine that pregnant women should get?

There are two type of flu vaccine. Pregnant women should get the injectable "flu shot" that is given with a needle, usually in the arm. The flu shot is approved for use in pregnant women. The other type of flu vaccine — nasal-spray flu vaccine—is a live virus vaccine and cannot be given to pregnant women.

Why aren't seniors in the priority group for H1N1 influenza vaccine, especially when Public Health recommends they get the seasonal flu vaccine?

People over 50 years of age and especially over 64 years are more at risk from serious illness from seasonal flu (the strains of influenza virus that come around every year). However, H1N1 influenza appears to have less of an effect on older people. People over 64 have had much lower rates of serious illness, hospitalization, and death from H1N1 influenza than the rest of the public. It is possible that people over 64 have had exposure to a similar influenza virus early in life that has given their immune systems a stronger ability to fight against H1N1 influenza virus. However, after the initial target groups have had time to be vaccinated, vaccine could be made available to persons over 64 years.

Are the seasonal flu vaccine and H1N1 influenza vaccine the same thing?

No. The H1N1 influenza vaccine does not protect against the other influenza strains that are causing seasonal flu this season. The seasonal flu vaccine does not protect against H1N1 influenza. People in high risk groups for seasonal flu strains (such as seniors) and anyone who wants it should get both H1N1 and seasonal influenza vaccines so that they are fully protected. Seasonal flu vaccine is available from many pharmacies and healthcare providers now.

H1N1 VACCINE SAFETY

How safe is the H1N1 influenza vaccine?

The 2009 H1N1 vaccines have undergone all the safety testing and quality checks that are usually done for other vaccines. The Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) expects the H1N1 influenza vaccine to be as safe as seasonal flu vaccines, which have an excellent safety record. Over the years, hundreds of millions of Americans have safely received seasonal flu vaccines, and millions more worldwide. The H1N1 influenza vaccine was developed using the same processes and testing as seasonal flu vaccines.

Will I get the flu from the H1N1 flu vaccine?

No, flu vaccines cannot cause the flu. The viruses contained in flu shots are inactivated (killed), which means they cannot cause infection at all. In randomized, blinded studies, where some people got flu shots and others got saltwater shots, the only differences in symptoms was increased soreness in the arm and redness at the injection site among people who got the flu shot. There were no differences in terms of body aches, fever, cough, runny nose or sore throat.

The nasal spray flu vaccine contains a weakened live flu virus that is designed to cause a mild infection of the nose and throat to produce immune system protection against serious flu virus infections. In children, side effects can include runny nose, headache, wheezing, vomiting, muscle aches, and fever. In adults, side effects can include runny nose, headache, sore throat, and cough. Fever is not a common side effect in adults receiving the nasal-spray flu vaccine.

Once when I got the flu shot, I thought it gave me the flu. Is this possible?

No. But there are several reasons why someone might get flu-like symptoms even after they have been vaccinated against the flu.

1. People may be exposed to an influenza virus shortly before getting vaccinated or during the two-week period that it takes the body to gain full protection after getting vaccinated. This exposure may result in a person becoming ill with flu before the vaccine begins to protect them.
2. People may become ill from other (non-flu) viruses that circulate during the flu season, which can also cause flu-like symptoms (such as rhinovirus). These viruses may cause you to feel ill, but are less serious than influenza.
3. A person may be exposed to an influenza virus that is not included in the vaccine they received. There are many different influenza viruses. H1N1 influenza vaccine will only protect against the H1N1 strain of influenza. Seasonal flu vaccine will protect against other strains of influenza that health experts predict will be in circulation, but it's possible that the seasonal flu vaccine will not include all the circulating strains because vaccines must be manufactured months before the flu season starts.
4. Unfortunately, some people can remain unprotected from flu despite getting the vaccine. This is more likely to occur among people that have weakened immune systems. However, even among some people with weakened immune systems, the flu vaccine can often help prevent more severe illness from influenza.

What are potential side effects from the H1N1 vaccine?

Most people will not experience side effects. If side effects occur, they will likely be similar to the mild side effects some people have with seasonal influenza vaccine and usually begin soon after the shot and last 1-2 days. In adults, the main side effect is soreness, redness, or swelling in the arm where the shot was given. A small fraction of children who get influenza vaccine may develop mild fever and/or muscle aches.

As with any medicine, there is a very small chance that an unexpected or severe allergic reaction (even death) may occur, but serious problems from the flu vaccine are very rare. The risk from the vaccine is much smaller than the risk from the disease. However, if you have a severe (life-threatening) allergy to chicken eggs or to any other substance in the vaccine, you should not be vaccinated.

Testing for the H1N1 influenza vaccine seems like it was very quick. Was the testing adequate to produce a safe vaccine?

No corners were cut in the development and testing of H1N1 influenza vaccine. The H1N1 influenza vaccine was developed using the same manufacturing processes as seasonal flu vaccines and had even more testing than seasonal flu vaccines. In fact, if the H1N1 influenza had started circulating earlier—before this year's flu shot was developed—it would have been included in this year's regular flu shot like any other flu strain. The clinical trials (tests of the vaccine on humans) for H1N1 have not shown any unusual or unexpected side effects and new side effects from H1N1 vaccine are not anticipated. Because rare side effects can only be detected when very large numbers of persons get vaccinated, there are monitoring systems in place to detect any unexpected rare side effects.

Is the thimerosal in the H1N1 vaccine safe?

A tiny amount of thimerosal (which contains mercury) is used as a preservative in vaccines. The American Academy of Pediatrics, the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) and the Institute of Medicine have concluded, based on thorough review of scientific data, that thimerosal-

containing vaccines are safe and do not cause autism or other health problems, a conclusion also reached by countries around the world.

For more information about H1N1 vaccine safety, go to:
http://cdc.gov/h1n1flu/vaccination/vaccine_safety_qa.htm

There was a swine flu vaccine in 1976 that made people sick—will there be the same problem with the 2009 H1N1 flu vaccine?

The 2009 H1N1 influenza vaccine is not expected to cause Guillain-Barré syndrome (GBS), a rare neurological disorder linked to the 1976 swine flu vaccine. In 1976, a study found that those who got the 1976 swine flu vaccine had a higher risk for GBS than those who were not vaccinated (about 1 additional case occurred per 100,000 people vaccinated). It is possible that in 1976, GBS resulted from a problem with chicken eggs used in the vaccine manufacturing process.

Since then, numerous studies have evaluated whether other flu vaccines are associated with GBS. The seasonal influenza vaccine has a very good safety track record and has not had a clear link with GBS. The 2009 H1N1 vaccine was made using the same processes and testing as seasonal flu vaccines (which is a different process than the one used to develop the 1976 swine flu vaccine) and is expected to be as safe.

HOW TO GET H1N1 VACCINE

Where can I get H1N1 influenza vaccine?

Currently, due to very limited supplies, H1N1 vaccines are only available for people in the priority groups. These groups can get their H1N1 influenza vaccine at the same place they get the seasonal flu vaccine, such as Public Health clinics, many private health care providers, and pharmacies. Once vaccines are more plentiful, all individuals and families will be able to get their H1N1 influenza vaccine. Check the Flu Hotline at 877-903-KING (5464) or Public Health's Web site (www.kingcounty.gov/health/h1n1) for regular updates on where to get H1N1 vaccine. You can also call your health care provider to find out when they may have the H1N1 vaccine.

How much will the H1N1 influenza vaccine cost?

The H1N1 vaccine is provided free of cost by the federal government, but the office or organization that gives the shot may charge an administrative fee (typically \$12-22). Most insurers will reimburse costs.

How many doses of H1N1 vaccine will I need?

Adults and children 10 years and older will need one dose. Children 9 years and younger will need two doses spaced at least 28 days apart.

Is it OK to have more than 28 days between a first and second dose of H1N1 vaccine for children under 10?

Yes, a longer period than 28 days is fine. The first dose is not wasted if longer than 28 days passes between the first dose and the booster.

If a child only has one dose of H1N1 vaccine, will he or she have any protection against H1N1?

One dose is better than none. It's possible the *some* children will develop *some* immune response from just one dose. But to ensure that a child is adequately protected, children should get both doses.

Can a pharmacy hold a second dose of vaccine for my child at the time that she gets her first dose?

No, according to guidance from the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC), vaccine providers should not reserve H1N1 vaccine doses.

Can I still get it if I don't have health insurance?

There will be opportunities to get vaccinated for people without health insurance and who can't afford to pay. These public clinic locations will be publicized on Public Health's website:

www.kingcounty.gov/health/h1n1

I'm not a U.S. citizen. Can I still get the vaccine?

Yes. Preventing the spread of influenza throughout our entire community is important so vaccine will be given to everyone, regardless of citizenship.

Can I get thimerosal-free H1N1 influenza vaccine?

Some H1N1 influenza vaccines will be available in thimerosal-free formulations, including the nasal spray vaccine. However the majority of influenza vaccines do contain small amounts of thimerosal as a preservative to prevent bacterial contamination.

Can I get the H1N1 vaccine as nasal-spray?

If you are a healthy person 2 to 49 years of age and not pregnant, you can get the nasal-spray vaccine. It is safe to get nasal-spray vaccine if you are breastfeeding or if you are sick with a minor illness. If you have a stuffy or runny nose, nasal-spray vaccine may be less effective. Check with your healthcare provider or pharmacist to find out if they offer nasal-spray vaccine.

For more information, see

www.kingcounty.gov/healthservices/health/preparedness/pandemicflu/swineflu/FluMistGeneral.aspx

Will I be able to get the seasonal vaccine and the H1N1 vaccine at the same time?

Yes. You can get most seasonal flu and H1N1 vaccines on the same day, if both are available.

However, there is one exception - you cannot get two nasal spray vaccines on the same day. A seasonal flu nasal-spray vaccine and a H1N1 nasal-spray vaccine need to be separated by at least four weeks.

Seasonal vaccine is available in many areas now, and if it is available near you, – don't wait until H1N1 vaccine becomes available to get immunized. Both influenza viruses can cause illness, hospitalizations and death this fall and winter.

If you are at risk for severe influenza and are also in a group at risk for pneumococcal pneumonia, ask your health care provider about pneumococcal vaccine to prevent the complications of flu.

For more information and on-going updates:

Public Health – Seattle & King County H1N1 Influenza web site: www.kingcounty.gov/health/H1N1
Flu Hotline, 877-903-5464, 24 hours/day (English and Spanish)