

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 they are at high risk for infection and 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. In the first weeks that the H1N1 vaccine is available, starting in October, 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 is expected to be widely available to anyone who wants it within several weeks after the first doses arrive.

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.

H1N1 VACCINE SAFETY

How safe is the H1N1 influenza vaccine?

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?

The H1N1 influenza vaccine was developed using the same manufacturing processes and testing as 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 once the vaccine is in use.

Is the thimerosal in the H1N1 vaccine safe?

Although some in the public are concerned about health risks from thimerosal, a preservative used in vaccines to prevent bacterial contamination, it has never been shown to cause autism or any health problems. An exhaustive 2004 report by the Institute of Medicine of the National Academies of Science concluded that thimerosal in vaccines does not cause autism, a conclusion also reached by countries around the world. The American Academy of Pediatrics, the US Centers for Disease Control and Prevention and the Institute of Medicine have concluded, based on scientific data, that thimerosal-containing vaccines are safe.

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

HOW TO GET H1N1 VACCINE

Where can I get H1N1 influenza vaccine?

Once the vaccine is available, most individuals and families in King County will be able to get their H1N1 influenza vaccine at the same place they get the seasonal flu vaccine, such as Public Health clinics and many private health care providers and pharmacies. Check with the Flu Hotline at 877-903-KING (5464) or Public Health's Web site (www.kingcounty.gov/health/h1n1) to find out more about where to get H1N1 vaccine when it is available. You can also call your health care provider to see if they will have the H1N1 vaccine once it is available.

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 a minimal administrative fee (likely to be around \$15).

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.

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)