

Flu Season Fact Sheet for Long-Term Care Facilities

In June 2009, the World Health Organization declared that the new H1N1 flu virus had spread throughout the world, becoming the first global pandemic in decades.

Flu of any type can be dangerous in long-term care facilities. To help facilities address this threat, here are answers to some questions frequently asked of the Section for Long Term Care of the Department of Health and Senior Services:

What is H1N1?

The H1N1 virus is a recently detected illness in humans. You may have also heard the terms ‘swine flu’ or ‘novel influenza A(H1N1)’ – all are talking about the same virus that was identified for the first time in the United States in April 2009.

Is H1N1 contagious?

The H1N1 virus is contagious and is spreading easily among people. So far, children and young adults age six months to 24 years old have been more likely to become ill from this virus. Health care workers, emergency responders, and people caring for infants who are ill with flu-like symptoms need to use standard precautions necessary to avoid infection. Serious complications and even some deaths after H1N1 infection have occurred among pregnant women, so they should take precautions to avoid exposure to people ill with this virus.

The Missouri Department of Health and Senior Services has information and advice for pregnant woman on the department’s Web site. It is available at http://www.dhss.mo.gov/BT_Response/Pregnant.html The Centers for Disease Control and Prevention has a good fact sheet on H1N1 and pregnancy available at <http://www.cdc.gov/h1n1flu/guidance/pregnant.htm>

What are the signs and symptoms of H1N1 infection?

The symptoms of H1N1 flu virus in people include fever of 100 degrees F or higher, cough, sore throat, runny or stuffy nose, body aches, headache, chills and fatigue. A few patients infected with this virus also have reported diarrhea and vomiting.

How does this compare with seasonal influenza?

In seasonal flu, certain people are at high risk of serious complications. This includes people 65 years and older, children younger than five, pregnant women, and people of any age with certain chronic medical conditions. People age 65 and older should be encouraged to receive a vaccination for the seasonal flu as soon as possible. Vaccine for seasonal influenza should be readily available this fall and should be given to groups at risk of contracting seasonal flu as soon as it is available. Vaccination against seasonal influenza does not protect you against H1N1, but can help most people stay healthier by preventing seasonal influenza.

Current studies indicate that persons age 65 or older are at less risk from the new H1N1 virus than younger people. Therefore, people in higher-risk groups, such as pregnant

women, will receive the new vaccine first. As younger age groups become vaccinated and additional supplies of vaccine become available, programs and providers should offer H1N1 vaccination to people over the age of 65.

About 70 percent of people who have been hospitalized with the H1N1 virus have had one or more underlying medical conditions that put them at risk of flu-related complications. These medical conditions include pregnancy, diabetes, heart disease, lung disease, kidney disease and conditions that weaken a person's immune system.

How do you catch the H1N1 virus?

The H1N1 virus spreads the same way that seasonal flu spreads. Flu viruses travel mainly from person to person through coughing or sneezing by people with influenza. Sometimes viruses coughed into the air come to rest on objects or the surface of tables and desks. People can become infected by touching that surface or object, then touching their mouth or nose.

What can I do to protect myself from getting sick?

A vaccine is under development to protect humans against the H1N1 virus. It is expected to be ready for the public in the fall.

But everyday actions can help limit the spread of germs that cause respiratory illnesses like influenza. Long-term care employees and residents should take these steps to protect their health:

- Wash their hands often with soap and water, especially after they cough or sneeze. Alcohol-based hand cleaners are also effective if soap and water are not available.
- Cover their nose and mouth with a tissue when they cough or sneeze. Throw the tissue in the trash after they use it. If no tissue is available, they should cough or sneeze into their sleeve.
- Avoid touching their eyes, nose or mouth. Germs spread this way.
- Try to avoid close contact with sick people.
- If they get the flu, they should stay home from work or school and limit contact with others to keep from infecting them. They should remain at home until 24 hours after their symptoms have ended.

Are there medicines to treat H1N1?

Two antiviral medicines are available to treat persons with H1N1, and a person's health care provider can determine whether specific treatment is necessary. The medicine names are Oseltamivir, which is sold under the trade name Tamiflu®, or Zanamivir, sold under the trade name Relenza.® These prescription medicines work best when started within two days of the onset of symptoms and can make a person feel better faster and the illness milder. They may also prevent serious flu complications. Most people, however, recover from H1N1 infection without treatment.

How long can an infected person spread H1N1 influenza to others?

Persons with the H1N1 virus may be contagious from one day before they develop symptoms until 24 hours after they recover. Children, especially younger children, and

people with weakened immune systems, might be contagious for longer periods. In general, individuals with H1N1 flu should stay home and not go into the community except to seek medical care until a full day after their symptoms have disappeared. Persons who are sick should stay home until at least 24 hours after they are free of fever without the use of medication.

What should I do if I get sick?

If you live in areas where people have been confirmed as having the H1N1 flu and you become ill with flu-like symptoms – including fever, body aches, runny or stuffy nose, sore throat,– you should stay home and avoid contact with other people. Staying at home means that you should not leave your home except to seek medical care. This means avoiding normal activities, including work, school, travel, shopping, social events, and public gatherings.

If you have severe illness or you are at high risk for flu complications, contact your health care provider or seek medical care. Your health care provider will determine whether flu testing or treatment is needed. If you become ill and experience any of the following warning signs, seek emergency medical care.

In children, emergency warning signs that need urgent medical attention include:

- Fast breathing or trouble breathing
- Bluish or gray skin color
- Not drinking enough fluids
- Severe or persistent vomiting
- Not waking up or not interacting
- Being so irritable that the child does not want to be held
- Flu-like symptoms improve but then return with fever and worse cough
- Fever with a rash

In adults, emergency warning signs that need urgent medical attention include:

- Difficulty breathing or shortness of breath
- Pain or pressure in the chest or abdomen
- Sudden dizziness
- Confusion
- Severe or persistent vomiting
- Flu-like symptoms improve but then return with fever and worse cough

How can I gain additional information?

To learn more about the H1N1 virus, visit the Missouri Department of Health and Senior Services' H1N1 Web site at http://www.dhss.mo.gov/BT_Response/H1N1Flu.html and the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention's Web site, <http://www.flu.gov/>

Long-term care facilities should have a plan in place to minimize the consequences of H1N1. Please visit www.dhss.mo.gov/BT_Response/LTC.html to obtain a Pandemic Influenza Planning Checklist for long-term care and other residential facilities to assist you in your efforts to protect your residents.