

# PRINCETON PACKET

## HEALTH MATTERS:

### Swine flu: The facts you need to know

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As the H1N1 or swine flu vaccine becomes available throughout our region this fall, more people will have an opportunity to protect themselves and their families against this serious but preventable virus.

Myths about the vaccine and the virus itself raise many questions. This is why it is so important to have the facts you need to guard against H1N1 and keep yourself and your loved ones healthy.

The following are answers to some of the most commonly asked questions about the H1N1 virus and the vaccine.

Why is there so much attention on H1N1 when seasonal flu is just as, if not more, dangerous?

Health officials are concerned about H1N1 because it is a new strain of the influenza virus that is very different from seasonal flu and most people have little or no immunity built up against it.

In addition, H1N1 appears to have a greater effect on people under age 25. There have been relatively few cases among people over age 64, which is unusual compared to seasonal flu. Doctors theorize that this may be because older adults were exposed to a strain of H1N1 decades ago and have antibodies to fight it.

While H1N1 is a global concern, it is important to remember that seasonal flu remains a serious health threat, too. Each year in the United States, an average of 36,000 people die from flu-related complications and more than 200,000 people are hospitalized.

What are the symptoms of H1N1 and how do I get tested?

Symptoms of H1N1 are similar to seasonal flu and include fever, cough, sore throat, runny or stuffy nose, muscle aches, headache, chills and fatigue. Patients have also reported diarrhea and vomiting, which are not typically associated with seasonal flu.

If you have these symptoms, contact your physician, who will determine the course of treatment. In most cases, people who are otherwise healthy recover from the flu virus without any treatment other than rest. However, if you are severely ill and experience shortness of breath or chest pain, call 9-1-1 and head to the nearest emergency

department.

Regardless of your symptoms, in most cases you will not be tested for H1N1 unless your condition is serious enough to require hospitalization in the intensive care unit.

Patients need to be aware that per the protocol established by the state Department of Health and Senior Services the H1N1 test will not be administered in the physician's office or the emergency department.

Federal and state health officials expect that most people with flu symptoms this season will not require testing because the results do not change the course of treatment, which for most cases typically involves rest and, in some instances, antiviral medication.

Who should get the H1N1 vaccine and where is it being administered?

The Centers for Disease Control and Prevention recommends that the first groups to receive the vaccine should be:

- Pregnant women;

- People who live with or care for infants younger than six months of age;

- Health care and emergency personnel;

- Anyone from 6 months through 24 years of age, and/or

- Anyone from 25 through 64 with certain chronic medical conditions such as diabetes or asthma or a weakened immune system.

As the vaccine becomes more widely available, these groups should also be vaccinated:

- Healthy individuals between the ages of 25 and 64 years old, and

- Adults age 65 and older.

You should not get the vaccine if you have a serious allergy to eggs.

Vaccines will be available at various sites throughout New Jersey. There will be no fee for the actual vaccine, although your provider may charge to administer the vaccine.

Why are pregnant women being so strongly encouraged to get the vaccine?

Pregnant women are at higher risk of complications, including serious illness and death, from contracting H1N1, as well as seasonal flu. Not only can vaccines protect the expectant mother, they can potentially provide protection to infants who cannot be vaccinated.

Keep in mind that pregnant women should receive the shot form of the vaccine versus the nasal mist. The shot contains killed flu virus, while the nasal spray is made with weakened, live virus. Nasal spray flu vaccine should only be used in healthy people between 2 and 49 years of age who are not pregnant.

Will a seasonal flu vaccine protect against H1N1 and vice versa?

No. The viruses are two different strains requiring two different vaccinations.

How safe is the H1N1 vaccine, given that it was only recently developed?

The H1N1 vaccine was developed using the same careful processes and facilities used to make seasonal influenza vaccines and has a similar safety profile. Mild side effects may include soreness or redness where the shot was given; headache, fever and nausea, and typically last for one to two days.

Life-threatening allergic reactions are very rare and normally occur within minutes to a few hours after the shot. Symptoms of an allergic reaction include difficulty breathing, hoarseness, wheezing, hives, paleness, weakness, rapid heartbeat or dizziness. If you experience these symptoms after a flu shot, call your doctor and seek emergency treatment.

Why are health professionals cautioning against swine flu parties?

Swine flu parties are a dangerous trend in which people intentionally come in close contact with a person who already has H1N1 so they can become infected and build up antibodies. These people are putting themselves and their community at risk, as H1N1 affects everyone differently and is potentially fatal.

Other than the vaccine, how else can H1N1 be prevented?

The best way to protect against H1N1 is by washing your hands regularly. In addition, cough and sneeze into your elbow and dispose of any used tissues in a closed container. Most importantly, if you do become sick, stay home until you are symptom-free or seek medical care if you have severe symptoms such as chest pain or shortness of breath.

For more information about H1N1, call the New Jersey Department of Health and Senior Services hotline at 1-866-321-9571.

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