

LaGrange County Health Department Nursing Office

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Novel H1N1 Flu and What you Should Know

Novel H1N1 Flu

Novel H1N1 is a new influenza virus causing illness in people. This new virus was first detected in people in the United States in April 2009. This virus is spreading from person-to-person worldwide, probably in much the same way that regular seasonal influenza viruses spread. On June 11, 2009, the World Health Organization (WHO) signaled that a pandemic of novel H1N1 flu was underway.

Why is it sometimes called the “Swine Flu”?

This virus was originally referred to as “swine flu” because laboratory testing showed that many of the genes in this new virus were very similar to influenza viruses that normally occur in pigs in North America. But further studies have shown that this new virus is very different from what normally circulates in North American pigs. It has two genes from flu viruses that normally circulate in pigs in Europe and Asia and bird (avian) genes and human genes. Scientists call this a “quadruple reassortant” virus.

Novel H1N1 Flu in Humans

Are there human infections with novel H1N1?

Yes. Human infections with the new H1N1 virus are ongoing in the United States. Most people who have become ill with the virus have recovered without requiring medical treatment. The Center for Disease Control (CDC) is working with states to collect, compile and analyze information about influenza and has done the same with H1N1 since the beginning of this outbreak.

Is novel H1N1 virus contagious?

CDC has determined that novel H1N1 virus is contagious and is spreading from human to human.

How does novel H1N1 virus spread?

The spread of the virus is thought to occur in the same way that seasonal flu spreads. Flu viruses are spread mainly from person to person through coughing or sneezing by people with influenza. Sometimes people may become infected by touching something, such as a surface or object, with the flu virus on it and then touching their mouth or nose.

What are the signs and symptoms of this virus in people?

The symptoms of novel H1N1 flu virus in people include fever, cough, sore throat, runny or stuffy nose, body aches, headache, chills and fatigue. A significant number of people who have been infected with this virus also have reported diarrhea and vomiting. Severe illnesses and death have occurred as a result of illness associated with this virus.

How severe is illness associated with novel H1N1 flu virus?

Illness with the new H1N1 virus has ranged from mild to severe. While most people who have been sick have recovered without needing medical treatment, hospitalizations and deaths from this infection have occurred.

With seasonal flu, certain people are at “high risk” of serious complications. This includes people 65 years and older, children younger than five years old, pregnant women, and people of any age with certain chronic medical conditions. About 70% of people who have been hospitalized with this novel H1N1 virus have had one or more medical conditions previously recognized as placing people at “high risk” of serious seasonal flu-related complications. This includes pregnancy, diabetes, heart disease, asthma and kidney disease.

One thing that appears to be different from seasonal influenza is that adults older than 64 years do not yet appear to be at increased risk of novel H1N1 related complications thus far. CDC laboratory studies have shown that no children and very few adults younger than 60 years old have existing antibody to novel H1N1 flu virus; however, about one-third of adults older than 60 may have antibodies against this virus. It is unknown how much, if any, protection may be afforded against novel H1N1 flu by any existing antibody.

How does novel H1N1 flu compare to seasonal flu in terms of its severity and infection rates?

With seasonal flu, we know that seasons vary in terms of timing, duration and severity. Seasonal influenza can cause mild to severe illness, and at times can lead to death. Each year, in the United States, on average 36,000 people die from flu-related complications and more than 200,000 people are hospitalized from flu-related causes. Of those hospitalized, 20,000 are children younger than 5 years of age. Over 90% of deaths and about 60% of hospitalization occur in people older than 65 years.

When the novel H1N1 outbreak was first detected in mid April 2009, CDC began working with states to collect data regarding the novel H1N1 flu outbreak, including the number of confirmed and probable cases and the ages of these people. The information analyzed by CDC supports the conclusion that novel H1N1 flu has caused a greater disease burden in people younger than 25 years of age than older people. Pregnancy and other previously recognized high risk medical conditions such as, asthma, diabetes, suppressed immune systems, heart disease, kidney disease, neurocognitive and neuromuscular disorders appear to be associated with increased risk of complications from this novel H1N1 Influenza.

How long can an infected person spread this virus to others?

People infected with seasonal flu and novel H1N1 flu shed virus and may be able to infect others from 1 day before getting sick to 5 to 7 days after. This can be longer in some people, especially children and people with weakened immune systems and in people infected with the new H1N1 virus.