

November 2009

About H1N1 Influenza (Flu)

What is H1N1 flu?

H1N1 flu is a new strain of the influenza virus. It is a respiratory illness that causes symptoms similar to those of seasonal flu. Cases of H1N1 flu have been reported in people around the world, including Canada, which is why it has been called a pandemic.

During the first wave of the flu outbreak in Manitoba, some people experienced very severe symptoms from H1N1, but this was a small proportion of the people who had the flu. Most Manitobans who have become ill have not required hospitalization or specific medical care.

How is H1N1 flu spread?

The H1N1 flu virus appears to spread in the same way as other kinds of the flu. It spreads easily from person to person when the virus released from an infected person's coughing and sneezing enters the nose and/or throat of another person. The virus can also rest on hard surfaces for a number of hours, and when someone touches that surface with their hands, they can pick up the virus if they touch their mouth, nose and/or eyes.

What are the symptoms of H1N1 flu?

H1N1 flu is a respiratory illness that causes symptoms similar to those of the regular seasonal flu. Typically, flu symptoms include fever and a cough that come on suddenly, and sometimes can include sore throat, muscle aches, joint pain or tiredness. Children may also feel sick to their stomach, vomit or have diarrhea, but these symptoms are not as common in adults. Elderly people, young children and people with lowered immunity may not have a fever.

WHO IS AT RISK?

Who is at risk for more severe illness from H1N1?

Most Manitobans who have become ill with H1N1 flu have not needed specific medical care or hospitalization. However, the following groups have been at greater risk for developing severe H1N1 illness:

- children under five
- anyone of Aboriginal ancestry
- disadvantaged populations (for example homeless)
- people living in remote or isolated areas
- people under 65 with a chronic medical condition or other risk conditions, including severe obesity, substance abuse or alcoholism
- anyone with weakened immune systems
- pregnant women

People 65 years and older and others who may be frail, have mobility problems or live alone may be at risk of severe illness from both H1N1 and seasonal flu. The symptoms for H1N1 and seasonal flu are similar, so it is important for all Manitobans to monitor their symptoms and seek early medical advice and treatment – particularly if they are at risk of developing serious illness from either strain of flu.

I'm pregnant- should I be concerned?

Pregnant women are not more likely to get H1N1, but if they do catch the virus, they may be more likely to have severe illness that may affect their pregnancy. However, the vast majority of pregnant women did not require medical or hospital care during the first wave of the pandemic in Manitoba.

Any infectious illness can put a mother and unborn baby's health at risk. Generally, the risk of complications from H1N1, like pneumonia and severe respiratory distress, is greater in the second and third trimesters of pregnancy, and during the first four weeks after delivery. Complications from H1N1 in the mother may also affect the fetus.

Early treatment can help to reduce the risk of severe illness, so pregnant women should visit a health care provider as soon as possible if they develop flu symptoms. The same basic precautions are still the best defense against H1N1, including washing your hands regularly with soap and water and covering your nose and mouth when coughing or sneezing. For more information on H1N1 and pregnancy, please see the fact sheet *H1N1 Flu FAQs for Pregnant Women*.

What should I do if I have a chronic health condition?

People with chronic health conditions are not more likely to get H1N1 but they may be more likely to have severe illness if they catch the virus. Early treatment can help to reduce the risk of severe illness, so people with chronic health conditions should visit a health care provider as soon as possible if they develop flu symptoms.

The same basic precautions are still the best defense against H1N1, including washing your hands regularly with soap and water and covering your nose and mouth when coughing or sneezing.

What about children?

Children should take the same precautions as adults, including washing their hands regularly and covering their nose and mouth when coughing or sneezing. Young children may need help with hand washing. Children with flu symptoms should stay home from school or child care until they are well enough to participate in their day-to-day activities. If you have questions or are concerned that your child may need care, contact your health care provider or **Health Links-Info Santé** at **788-8200** or **1-888-315-9257**.

Parents and guardians are encouraged to have two back-up plans for child care. Child care plans should consider:

- child care arrangements if your child is sick and unable to attend school
- child care arrangements if a parent or guardian is sick and requires support after school-hours
- child care arrangements if your child care provider is sick and unable to provide care

PREVENTION

What precautions should I take?

Manitobans are encouraged to use routine precautionary measures to prevent infections:

- Stay home from school or work while you are ill and limit unnecessary contact with others or use a tissue to cover your nose and mouth. Place the tissue in the garbage.
- Wash your hands often with soap and water, especially after you cough or sneeze. When soap and water are unavailable, hand sanitizers may be an acceptable alternative if hands are not visibly soiled.
- Limit touching your eyes, nose or mouth.
- Maintain your health by taking care of yourself and those in your care. This includes eating a healthy, balanced diet, avoiding cigarette smoke and other harmful substances, being active and getting enough rest and sleep.

Should I be wearing a mask?

It is not recommended that healthy people wear masks as they go about their daily routines. Improper use may actually increase the risk of infection. If someone in your home has flu symptoms, you have likely been exposed to the ill person, or the same source as the ill person, before symptoms appeared.

How can I prepare?

Manitobans are encouraged to have a home flu kit that includes the following items:

- digital thermometer
- ibuprofen(eg. Advil®) or acetaminophen (eg. Tylenol® or Tempra®) - do not give ASA (eg. Aspirin®) to children and teens
- facial tissues
- soap and water

Plan for someone to look after you or your children if you are ill and offer to provide others with the same support. You should also identify family members, friends or neighbours who may be living alone and call them regularly to see if they need help dealing with the flu.

VACCINES

Is vaccination considered safe?

Vaccination is one of the most effective ways to prevent disease. It helps the immune system recognize and control the germs that cause diseases. Vaccines have been used to help protect Manitobans from disease for decades and are now commonly given for seasonal flu, mumps, measles, polio, diphtheria and tetanus. All vaccines go through a federal process that reviews safety and effectiveness data before issuing a licence for use. However, like all medicines and vaccines, flu shots may cause side effects. To find out more about possible side effects, please talk to your immunization provider or see the applicable vaccine fact sheet available at www.manitoba.ca

How well will this vaccine protect against H1N1 flu?

Like other influenza vaccines, the H1N1 flu shot is expected to provide protection within two weeks of being vaccinated. In a study of healthy adults between 18 and 60 years of age the H1N1 flu shot with adjuvant produced protective levels of antibody (immunity) in 98 to 100 per cent of people. The same study showed that the H1N1 flu shot without adjuvant produced protective levels of antibody in 94 per cent of people participating in the study. So both the H1N1 flu vaccine with adjuvant and the vaccine without adjuvant provide a strong immune response in over 90 per cent of people who received it.

How long will the H1N1 flu shot protect me from getting H1N1 flu?

Seasonal flu shots usually provide protection for about six months or longer. However, because the H1N1 flu shot is new, it is not known how long it will provide protection.

Can I get the H1N1 flu shot at the same time as other immunizations?

Yes, the H1N1 flu shot can be given anytime before, at the same time as (in a separate limb), or anytime after the seasonal flu shot or any other vaccination.

What is the difference between a vaccine with adjuvant and a vaccine without adjuvant?

A vaccine with adjuvant is a vaccine that includes a substance that boosts an individual's immune system and increases their response to a vaccine. A vaccine without adjuvant has no "booster" element.

Adjuvants are included in common vaccines such as tetanus and hepatitis B. The adjuvant in the H1N1 flu shot is made up of squalene (a natural protein extracted from shark livers), vitamin E, and polysorbate 80 (a substance commonly found in ice cream and cosmetics).

I think I may have had the flu, but was never tested to find out if I had H1N1 – should I still get the H1N1 flu shot?

Yes, the H1N1 flu shot helps your body build immunity against this specific virus. If you have had an illness that you suspect was the flu, it is still recommended and considered safe for you to get the H1N1 flu shot.

The shot is not recommended for people who have already had a lab-confirmed case of H1N1 flu, because they will have developed their own immunity.

Is it true that there is mercury in the vaccine? How much mercury?

Both vaccines contain a small amount of thimerosal. Thimerosal is a form of mercury used in the H1N1 flu shot to maintain its quality during storage. Thimerosal is a different form of mercury than the mercury known to cause health problems.

The amount in the H1N1 flu shot is much less than the daily limit recommended for environmental exposure to mercury. For example, there is significantly less mercury in the vaccine than you would find in a can of tuna fish.

On rare occasions, thimerosal can cause allergic reactions. Therefore, anyone known to have a severe allergy to thimerosal should not get the H1N1 flu shot.

Is it true that there is 10 times more mercury in the vaccine without adjuvant?

Yes, the unadjuvanted vaccine does contain 50 micrograms of thimerosal while the adjuvanted vaccine has only 5 micrograms of thimerosal. The 50 micrograms remains within the daily limit recommended for environmental exposure to mercury. There's significantly less mercury in the vaccine than you would find in a can of tuna fish.

TREATMENT

What should I do if I think I have H1N1 flu?

If your symptoms are mild and you aren't at increased risk for severe illness, stay home, treat your fever and other symptoms, drink fluids, and rest until you feel well enough to return to work or school.

If you have flu symptoms and you also have risks for severe H1N1 illness, you should contact your health care provider because early treatment (ideally within 24 hours) is important.

If your flu symptoms get worse (even if you don't have risks for severe illness) or if you don't recover as you normally would, contact your health care provider - even if you have already seen them about your illness.

Go directly to an emergency room, nursing station, or health care provider, or call 911, if you or a family member has any of the following symptoms:

- shortness of breath or difficulty breathing
- severe or worsening symptoms
- dehydration (eg. decreased urination, increased thirst)
- drowsiness or confusion
- fever in an infant under three months old

For more information on when to seek medical attention, call **Health Links -Info Santé** at **788-8200** or **1-888-315-9257**.

Should I expect my health care provider to be wearing a mask?

In health care settings like hospitals and clinics, health care providers may use added precautions such as wearing a face mask to protect them from the virus when in close contact with affected patients. Health care providers have been trained to properly wear and remove a mask when performing examinations and medical procedures that put them at a greater risk of exposure to the virus.

What are antivirals?

Antivirals are drugs used for early treatment of the flu, but do not prevent someone from getting the flu. If taken soon after a person gets sick (within 48 hours), they can reduce flu symptoms, shorten the length of the illness and potentially reduce serious complications. Antivirals work by reducing a virus' ability to reproduce but they do not provide immunity from the virus.

If I have flu symptoms, will I be given antivirals?

Manitoba's health care providers follow clinical guidelines that recommend using antivirals to treat people who are very sick or considered to be at high risk for more severe illness. Your health care provider may prescribe an antiviral or another course of treatment based on your symptoms, your medical history and whether you are considered to be at risk for severe illness.

Should I be tested to find out if I have H1N1?

The province has guidelines on who should be tested for H1N1. Mostly people who are severely ill or have weakened immune systems will be tested. Recommendations for testing may change as we learn more about the virus. The test does not affect how your health care provider will care for you. Health care providers know how to diagnose and treat respiratory illnesses like H1N1 and don't need test results to provide care. Your health care provider will assess what treatment you need.

IN THE COMMUNITY

Will I be notified if there is a case of pandemic H1N1 flu in my child's school or child care program?

H1N1 is expected to be present in communities throughout Manitoba and in all public settings. As with any flu, parents of children attending school or child care programs may not be notified about individual cases. Schools and child care programs have been asked to report unusually high absenteeism to their local public health office. If regional public health officials have concerns about the level of absenteeism in a school or child care program, they will advise the school or program of any additional public health interventions that may be needed.

The same basic precautions are still the best defense against H1N1, including washing your hands regularly with soap and water and covering your nose and mouth when coughing or sneezing. Children who are ill should stay home until they are well enough to participate in their day-to-day activities. Parents of ill children can contact **Health Links-Info Santé** at **788-8200** or **1-888-315-9257** for advice on when to seek medical attention. Children who are feeling well do not need to stay home.

Will schools or child care facilities be closed?

Health officials assess the situation on an ongoing basis to determine the most appropriate ways to best protect the health of Manitobans and have shared updated information about H1N1 and appropriate infection prevention with schools and child care programs.

Any decision to close schools or child care facilities will be carefully considered and will depend on the specific situation. Public health will take into account the spread and severity of the virus in Manitoba, as well as recommendations from the Public Health Agency of Canada and other jurisdictions.

What if my children or students are nervous or scared?

While some children and youth may become very stressed or scared, others may not worry at all. Both reactions are normal. To prevent or deal with stress, talk about your own feelings clearly and calmly, provide age-appropriate information and infection control education, encourage discussion and maintain routines.

If children or youth display signs of tension (ex: difficulty sleeping, nightmares, aggression, clinginess, withdrawal or frequently verbalized concerns) let them know that everything possible is being done to keep them safe, encourage them to express themselves (through drawing pictures or talking), teach them coping skills (ex: deep breathing, fun time with caregivers), spend more time with them and, if needed, seek help from others such as caregivers, guidance counselors, school social workers or elders.

If someone at work is or has been sick, what should I do?

The likelihood of being exposed to H1N1 at work is generally the same as it would be in any other public setting or at home. While at work, you should wash your hands regularly and follow the same basic precautions as you would in any other setting. Masks are not recommended in most workplaces, even if colleagues or clients have been ill. If someone in your workplace has flu symptoms, they should stay home until they are well enough to participate in day-to-day activities.

If you have concerns about your workplace and its pandemic preparedness, speak to your employer, contact Manitoba Workplace Safety and Health, call your local public health office or visit www.manitoba.ca/flu for more information.

What if I'm feeling anxious or scared?

Although some adults may become very fearful about what might happen during a pandemic, others may not worry at all. Both reactions are normal. To prevent or deal with stress, plan for the future but live in the present. Maintain routines, connect with friends and family, limit media consumption and take care of your health. If you are feeling particularly worried and stressed, use the skills and experiences you have used in the past to help you manage any current anxiety. Talk to others, practice deep breathing, use spiritual or personal beliefs and seek help if needed.

MANITOBA'S RESPONSE

Does Manitoba have enough resources to respond to H1N1?

The province has a plan in place to respond to pandemics like H1N1, which focuses on:

- infection prevention measures
- health care response
- co-ordination with other governments
- public health advice to Manitobans, communities and organizations

Preparations began before H1N1 was identified and continue across the province. Health care facilities have plans in place to address an increase in the number of people seeking care for flu symptoms. The province also has a stockpile of supplies that can be distributed to regional health authorities and other health care facilities to supplement their own resources, when needed.

Manitoba remains well prepared to respond to H1N1 and will continue to build on the planning and work already done, based on public health advice.

For more information please visit the H1N1 flu website at www.manitoba.ca