

CONSTANT VIGILANCE

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Staying healthy through this year's flu season requires families to take extra precautions by maintaining ongoing vigilance through the fall and winter. Coupled with the return of seasonal flu, health experts believe H1N1 influenza—commonly known as “swine flu”—will return and circulate widely this year. Seasonal flu can be a serious illness and typically affects five to 20 percent of the U.S. population each year. Though influenza can be life-threatening to vulnerable populations, it's important to remember that the vast majority recover with no complications. Public health experts believe the severity of illness in those with swine flu will be similar to seasonal

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flu, but without any natural immunity to the new strain, many more people will likely become infected with swine flu before a vaccine is available.

Since the first outbreak of H1N1 influenza this past spring, drug manufacturers have been working on a vaccine to protect people from acquiring H1N1. The vaccine will likely be available in many places that provide the seasonal flu vaccine, including primary-care physician offices, medical clinics and public health clinics. Once it is made available, individuals in high-risk groups will be given priority for vaccination including:

- Pregnant women
- Children and young adults, from six months to 24 years old
- Adults aged 25 to 64 with chronic diseases or compromised immune systems
- Household members and caregivers of children younger than six months
- Healthcare workers and emergency medical service providers

The following are some basic ways to prepare yourself and your family for flu season:

Get your seasonal flu vaccine.

Protect yourself and your family from seasonal flu when the vaccine becomes available in the fall. Older adults are at higher risk for seasonal flu and should make sure to get vaccinated this year and every flu season. Remember that the seasonal flu vaccine typically lasts six to 12 months, so getting vaccinated in October or November will help provide protection through the end of the flu season in February or March.

Get an H1N1 flu vaccine.

This vaccine will require a two-dose treatment given three weeks apart and will provide immunity ap-

proximately two weeks after treatment. Those in high-risk groups—pregnant women, children and individuals with underlying health conditions—should be sure to get vaccinated.

Avoid interaction with those who are sick and avoid large crowds.

Limiting your exposure to those who have the flu will greatly reduce your chances of getting sick. If you can't avoid large crowds, remember to wash hands frequently or use hand sanitizer.

Stay home if you're sick.

Though it seems like commonsense advice, many people don't heed this simple rule, but your coworkers, family and friends will thank you for it. People with the flu are typically contagious one day before symptoms appear and up to six days afterward.

Use tissues to blow your nose, and throw them away immediately. Remember this basic rule of respiratory etiquette instead of using hands, clothing or cloth handkerchiefs. Children may need frequent reminders about following this rule.

Sneeze or cough into your sleeve, not your hand. This also helps reduce the spread of germs to other people and surfaces.

If flu symptoms are severe, seek medical treatment. Many people will experience sore throats, light fever and fatigue due to colds and flu, but if you or a loved one experiences any shortness of breath, contact your healthcare provider immediately for treatment.

For those who do come down with the flu, there are several medications to treat serious cases. They include amantadine, rimantadine, tamiflu and relenza. We don't yet know how effective these treatments will be for those with H1N1 influenza, but they have been proven effective in treating seasonal flu. Following the basic infection-prevention techniques of frequent hand-washing and avoiding those who are sick are still our best defenses against the flu.

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