



The AGS Foundation for Health in Aging's

What Older Adults and Their Caregivers Need to Know About

the 2009 H1N1 Flu ("Swine Flu"):

Advice from the American Geriatrics Society's
Foundation for Health in Aging

The new H1N1 flu (referred to as "swine flu" early on) pandemic that has now spread around the world is unusual because it has infected large numbers of people during the spring and summer—unlike the seasonal flu, which usually arrives in fall. Even so, many of the things you know about the seasonal flu also apply to the "2009 H1N1" flu.

Like seasonal flu, 2009 H1N1 appears to spread from person to person through sneezing and coughing, and by direct contact with the virus on the hands of infected people. The symptoms of 2009 H1N1 flu are similar to the symptoms of seasonal flu: coughing, a sore throat, stuffy nose, fatigue, chills, body aches, headaches and fever. Some people infected with the virus have complained of nausea, diarrhea and vomiting as well.

Most cases of 2009 H1N1 flu reported in the US thus far have been mild. Children, young adults and those with chronic diseases and health problems that put them at high risk of complications from the seasonal flu appear to be at greatest risk of serious complications from the H1N1 flu. These symptoms include bronchitis and pneumonia. While these complications can be particularly dangerous for older adults, who often have weaker immune systems than younger people, current research shows that, thus far, older adults have run a lower risk of infection with the H1N1 virus than younger people.

Some basic strategies, including those that can protect you from the seasonal flu, can help protect you against the 2009 H1N1 flu, and help lower your risk of complications if you do get it. Here's what the experts with the American Geriatrics Society's Foundation for Health and Aging suggest:

Don't panic! Remember, the 2009 H1N1 flu virus making the rounds in the US appears to be fairly mild.

Help stop the spread of 2009 H1N1 and all flu viruses with some simple precautions:

- Wash your hands often with soap and water—especially after you sneeze or cough, and before you eat
- Use an alcohol-based hand gel to clean your hands if you don't have access to soap and water
- Cover your mouth and nose with a tissue when you cough or sneeze and throw the tissue in the garbage.
- Cough or sneeze into the upper part of your sleeve if you don't have a tissue
- Avoid touching your eyes, nose and mouth
- Try to avoid close contact with people who are sick

Call your healthcare provider, or your older loved one's healthcare provider if you suspect 2009 H1N1 flu If you or a loved one has a fever, chills, aches, a sore throat, cough or other flu symptoms, tell your or his healthcare provider immediately. If necessary, your provider can write a prescription for one of two antiviral drugs, oseltamivir (Tamiflu®) or zanamivir (Relenza®), which can help your body fight both the seasonal flu and the 2009 H1N1 flu. These antiviral medications work differently than vaccines or antibiotics and need to be taken according to your healthcare provider's directions. They are most effective if given very early in the illness; so call your provider as soon as possible.

Stay home If you think you might have the flu, stay home until it's been seven days since your symptoms began, or until you've been symptom-free for 24 hours—whichever is longer. This will keep you from infecting others and spreading the virus further. If you have an older loved one, it's particularly important that you visit only after sufficient time has passed. Ask a healthy friend or relative if he or she can make visits to your loved one in the interim. In fact, until you're free of symptoms, you should avoid travel—unless you need to make a trip to a healthcare provider.

Ask your healthcare provider about taking antiviral drugs if you're an older adult who's planning to travel Your healthcare provider may recommend that you take Tamiflu® or Relenza® before you start your trip if you are going to an area with a high level of 2009 H1N1 activity. The drugs can also help prevent infection if you take them before you're exposed to the virus.

Talk to your healthcare provider about H1N1 immunization Clinical tests of H1N1 vaccinations were underway in the summer of 2009 and the U.S. Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) was planning to start immunization programs as soon as possible. Because vaccine availability will likely be limited initially, officials are recommending that the following individuals, who are particularly vulnerable if they get the H1N1 flu, be immunized first: pregnant women, those caring for children younger than 6 months, healthcare and emergency medical workers, those who are six-months to 24-years old, and those 25 through 64 who have health problems associated with higher risks of complications from the flu. Once vaccine demand among younger age groups has been met, experts are recommending that vaccinations be offered to those 65 or older.

Follow any additional advice from health officials You can find up-to-date information from the CDC at www.cdc.gov/h1n1flu/.



Foundation for Health in Aging

Established by the American Geriatrics Society



350 Fifth Avenue, Suite 801
New York, NY 10118
212-755-6810
www.healthinaging.org

The Foundation for Health in Aging builds a bridge between the research and practice of geriatrics health care professionals and the public. The Foundation advocates on behalf of older adults and their special needs through public education, clinical research, and public policy.

The American Geriatrics Society is dedicated to improving the health and well-being of older adults. With a membership of over 6,700 health care professionals, the AGS has a long history of improving the health care of older adults.