

H1N1 VACCINE Q & A

If I get the swine flu vaccine, will I still have to get the regular flu vaccine, too?

Yes. The regular flu shot protects you against seasonal influenza viruses that remain in circulation all the time but occur in epidemics every fall and winter. Most people should get this annual shot.

Regular flu shots protect you from more than one strain of influenza. This year, the seasonal flu shot includes one H1N1 strain — but that virus and the one the swine flu vaccine guards against are not the same. A number of H1N1 viruses have been isolated over the years. This happens because flu viruses are always rearranging their DNA. Novel swine influenza H1N1 is just the newest one.

The swine flu vaccine targets the H1N1 virus that made its first reported appearance in the United States and Mexico in spring 2009. The virus was quickly isolated and characterized as a new infectious agent. With novel swine flu H1N1 spreading in every region of the globe, the World Health Organization (WHO) declared the infection a pandemic.

Who should get the swine flu vaccine?

In the United States, the swine flu vaccine is recommended for:

- **Pregnant women.** The risk of swine flu complications is higher during pregnancy. Vaccinated mothers can potentially provide protection to infants who cannot be vaccinated.
- **Household contacts and caregivers for children younger than 6 months of age.** Younger infants are at higher risk of flu complications and cannot be vaccinated. Vaccination of those in close contact with infants less than 6 months old might reduce the infants' risk of exposure to the virus.
- **Health care and emergency medical services personnel.** Infections have been reported among health care workers, who can be a potential source of infection for vulnerable patients. Also, increased absenteeism in health care workers could reduce health care system capacity.
- **Babies, children and teens, 6 months through 18 years of age.** Many cases of novel H1N1 influenza have occurred in children. Influenza viruses spread easily in school and child care, and children infected in these settings carry the infection to their families.
- **Young adults, from 19 through 24 years of age.** Immunization is important for young adults because they tend to live, work, and study in close proximity, and they move and travel often.
- **People ages 25 through 64 years who have health conditions associated with higher risk of medical complications from influenza.** These conditions include heart disease, lung disease and some types of cancer.

What if there's not enough swine flu vaccine for everyone?

It's possible that demand for the swine flu vaccine will be higher than expected or some other unpredictable factor will slow vaccine production and distribution, particularly in the early stages of vaccine rollout. If necessary, these subgroups will have first access to the swine flu vaccine.

- Pregnant women
- People who live with or care for children younger than 6 months of age
- Health care and emergency services personnel with direct patient contact
- Children 6 months through 4 years of age
- Children 5 through 18 years of age who have chronic medical conditions

What about older people?

The risk of swine flu infection is lower for people age 65 or older than for younger people. But people over 65 should still get the seasonal flu vaccine, as has been recommended in other years. As vaccine supply and demand among younger age groups is being met, the swine flu vaccine will be offered to people over the age of 65.

When and where will the swine flu vaccine be available?

Every state and health department is developing a vaccine delivery plan. Vaccine will be available in a combination of settings such as vaccination clinics organized by local health departments, health care provider offices, schools, and other private settings such as pharmacies and workplaces. Most people should be able to get their seasonal and swine flu vaccines on the same day. However, if the availability of swine flu vaccine is delayed, you should go ahead and get your seasonal influenza vaccination as it becomes available.

Do both vaccines require a shot?

For pregnant women, children between 6 months and 2 years old and adults over 49, injections are required. Otherwise, you don't have to get two shots. The seasonal and 2009 H1N1 vaccines are both available in injection and nasal spray forms.

Will the swine flu vaccine be mandatory?

In the United States vaccination is voluntary. If you choose vaccination for yourself or your children, health professionals will screen you for contraindications to vaccination (such as an allergy to eggs). You will also receive information sheets describing the vaccine's risks and benefits, possible adverse events associated with vaccination, and how to report these events.

Is H1N1 any more dangerous than the regular seasonal flu?

It seems to behave much like mild to moderate seasonal flu for most people. But it can be very severe and deadly for some people. What's different about this flu is that it affects younger people disproportionately. Typically older people experience the worst flu symptoms. But with this new pandemic virus, there have been many severely ill kids and numerous deaths.

If you have already had the flu this year, do you still need to be vaccinated?

With specific medical questions, you should always consult your doctor. If you know that you had a confirmed case of H1N1 virus, then you are probably protected against getting it again. But very few patients have had confirmation of their illness, so it is recommended in those cases that you get vaccinated.

There is a lot of concern, and a lot of misinformation, about ingredients in vaccines such as adjuvants and Thimerosal. To what extent are these ingredients present in the H1N1 vaccine, and is the vaccine safe?

There are no adjuvants in any of the flu vaccines. There is Thimerosal in some of the vaccine supply. It is not in FluMist and it is not in some of the single-dose vials. So you can ask for Thimerosal-free vaccine. The CDC says H1N1 vaccine is as safe as the seasonal flu vaccine because it is manufactured in exactly the same way. They only changed the virus strain -- something they do every year when they make a new seasonal flu vaccine.