A Formidable Flu Season
*What you need to know and how to prepare*

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Each year, more than 200,000 people are hospitalized and 36,000 people die from seasonal flu complications. This fall, no one is taking lightly their health care provider’s advice to get a flu shot. H1N1 (formerly called “swine flu,”) first identified this spring, is expected to have a strong resurgence this fall and winter flu season, according to health industry experts.

As of August 30, 2009, approximately 9057 U.S. residents had been hospitalized and more than 593 had died from the disease *(before publication, these numbers should be updated by visiting CDC.gov where it’s regularly tallied)*. The Centers for Disease Control & Prevention (CDC), which monitors influenza strains that circulate in the U.S. each year, predicts that the number of H1N1 infections will again spike during this fall and winter.

With that said, I want to caution our community not to panic. Despite heightened news reports, so far, H1N1 isn’t more threatening than seasonal flu. From what health officials have observed in the Southern Hemisphere where flu season is now winding down, during these few months of this new flu's existence, hospitalizations and deaths seem to be lower than what is typically experienced during seasonal flu. The worry comes from the fact that more people are susceptible to H1N1 and U.S. health officials are concerned because it hung in so firmly here during the summer – a time of year when the flu usually goes away.

**H1N1 and Seasonal Flu: What’s the Difference?**

Seasonal flu, made up of influenza strains that the body has had some exposure to, changes each season, necessitating a new flu vaccine. When someone catches seasonal flu, the body remembers parts of the influenza virus it has previously been exposed to and is able to work through the illness and develop an immune response when it encounters seasonal flu again.

H1N1 is known as a “novel” flu, because, unlike seasonal flu – which involves combinations of flu strains that people’s immune systems have been regularly exposed to over the years – it is a new virus which many people haven’t previously encountered.

And, in contrast to traditional seasonal flu, which is particularly dangerous to the elderly, few H1N1 cases have been reported among those age 65 and over. Scientists think that one reason the senior population has fared better is that older individuals may have some residual immunity because their body remembers being exposed to earlier strains of H1N1 (1977) and similar strains (1957).

**Preparing for flu season**

Any flu virus is spread though coughing and sneezing by people who have the virus, or by touching an object that an infected person has touched and then touching your mouth or nose. The CDC recommends the following tips to prevent the flu or, if you are already ill, reduce the spread of infection:
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- Cover your nose and mouth when you cough or sneeze. Use a tissue or your arm, not your hands.
- Wash your hands often – and long – with soap and water, especially after you cough or sneeze. Or use an alcohol-based hand cleaner.
- Avoid touching your eyes, nose or mouth.
- Avoid close contact with sick people – keep at least 6 feet distance if possible.
- Stay home if you are sick for seven days after your symptoms begin or until you have been symptom- and fever-free for 24 hours (whichever is longer) to keep from infecting others.

You may be able to spread the flu virus beginning one day before symptoms develop and up to five days after becoming ill, according to the CDC, and children may remain contagious for seven days or more.

**Seasonal Flu Vaccine**

The best way to prevent getting seasonal flu is to get a flu vaccination every year – anytime from the beginning of the flu season in September through January and even the later winter months. The flu season is comprised of several outbreaks and the peak time varies from year to year, so it’s still a good idea to get a flu shot later in the fall or even into the winter months.

The seasonal flu vaccine is available via the flu shot or a nasal-spray. The flu shot is approved for children ages 6 months and older adults, both healthy individuals and those with chronic medical conditions. The nasal-spray flu vaccine is approved for healthy individuals ages 2 through 49, with the exception of pregnant women. The flu vaccine is safe, effective and, contrary to various rumors, does not cause the flu.

Some people get the flu vaccine and still contract the flu. This doesn’t mean that the vaccine is ineffective. The capability of the vaccine to prevent the flu depends on how well the viruses contained in the annual vaccine match those circulating in the human population at a given time.

People who have a severe allergy to eggs, have had a severe reaction to a past flu vaccination, or have an illness with a fever should not receive the flu vaccine. People who are sick should wait until their symptoms have eased to be vaccinated.

**H1N1 vaccine: A companion to your annual flu shot**

An H1N1 vaccine is under development and projected to be available in mid-October. Since the standard flu vaccine will not protect against the H1N1 virus – and vice versa – health experts recommend getting both the seasonal and the H1N1 flu vaccines. Clinical trials are currently being conducted to determine whether the two vaccines can be administered together or should be given separately. It’s not known at this point if one dose or two doses will be necessary for initial vaccination against the H1N1 virus.

The CDC recommends that the following high priority individuals receive the H1N1 vaccine as soon as it becomes available:
- pregnant women
- children and young adults ages 6 months to 24 years
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- persons who live with or provide care for infants under 6 months of age
- health care and emergency medical services personnel
- individuals ages 25-64 years who have a compromised immune system (diabetes, cancer, heart and lung disease, and HIV infection) which places them at higher risk for flu complications.

Once the demand for the vaccine is met among these priority groups, the CDC recommends that all individuals ages 25-64 receive the vaccine, and then individuals ages 65 and older, since research shows the risk is lower among this age group.

Scenic Mountain Medical Center and its health care team are committed to keeping our community informed about the flu season as new information becomes available. Watch for the next installment in this series, “Do I have the flu?” For more information on H1N1 or seasonal flu, visit us on the Web at www.smmccares.com or contact Dr. Scott Barclay at Cornerstone Family & Sports Medicine. Dr. Barclay is a board-certified family practitioner, with more than 13 years experience in caring for a broad range of health concerns. His office is located on the second floor of the Malone & Hogan Clinic.

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