

Difference Between Seasonal Flu and H1N1

Source: Fort Bend County Health & Human Services

It is not easy to tell if a person is sick with the seasonal flu or the novel (new) H1N1 flu. However, understanding the diseases can guide you to take measures beforehand to try to prevent yourself from becoming ill with either.

“Both seasonal flu and H1N1 are similar in many respects,” said Dr. Jean Galloway, director of Fort Bend County Health & Human Services. “They each can cause mild to severe illness and sometimes lead to death.”

Each year in the United States on average 36,000 people die from complications of seasonal flu, and more than 200,000 people are hospitalized. Of those hospitalized, most are adults, with about 20,000 being children younger than 5 years old.

The H1N1 virus tends to sicken younger people, which is quite unlike the seasonal flu that disproportionately affects older people. According to the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, in 2009 H1N1 flu has affected more people younger than 25 years of age than older people. At this time, there are few cases and few deaths reported in people older than 64 years old, which is unusual when compared with seasonal flu. Epidemiologists suspect that some adults over the age of 64 have a more experienced immune system which may provide some built in resistance to the novel H1N1.

“One thing that appears to be different from seasonal influenza is that adults older than 64 years do not appear to be at increased risk of 2009 H1N1-related complications thus far,” said Galloway. “The symptoms are nearly the same, although some symptoms are more common in one flu than the other.”

Other high risk groups tend to be equally susceptible to H1N1 flu and seasonal flu. Pregnancy and underlying medical conditions, such as asthma, diabetes, suppressed immune systems, heart disease, kidney disease, neurocognitive and neuromuscular disorders appear to increase the risk of complications from seasonal flu and H1N1.

Symptoms of both seasonal flu and H1N1 can include fever, headache, fatigue (tiredness), cough, sore throat, runny or stuffy nose, muscle aches, and sometimes stomach symptoms—like nausea, vomiting, and diarrhea. However, with seasonal flu the fever is usually quite high and any stomach symptoms tend to be more common in children than adults.

Both viruses can also be guarded against through a vaccine. However, while a vaccine is now available to prevent seasonal flu, H1N1 vaccine is just being developed and expected to be available by late fall. Seasonal flu’s vaccine is given in a single annual dose (or two doses one-month apart for first-time vaccinations for children younger than 9 years old). While earlier plans were to give H1N1 vaccine as a two-dose series, the possibility of a single dose is being explored.

“Because different groups of people are at greater risk for complications depending upon which flu they contract, the priorities for whom should get the vaccine differ,” she said.

| | Seasonal Flu | Novel H1N1 Flu |
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| Symptoms | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Fever, usually high • Headache • Extreme tiredness (fatigue) • Dry cough • Sore throat • Runny or stuffy nose • Muscle aches. • Nausea, vomiting, and diarrhea may also occur, but more common in children than adults. | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Fever • Cough • Sore throat • Runny or stuffy nose • Body aches • Headache • Chills • Fatigue • Many people have nausea, diarrhea and vomiting |
| Vaccine | <p>Available now and every year.</p> <p>Given as a single annual dose (except two doses, one-month apart for first-time vaccinations for children younger than 9 years old)</p> | <p>Vaccine is being developed and expected to be available later this fall.</p> <p>The possibility of a single dose is being explored.</p> |
| People most at risk for complications | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • The elderly • Very young children • People with chronic health conditions • Pregnant women | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Very young children • People with chronic health conditions • Pregnant women |
| Vaccination priority | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Children 6 months to 19 years old. • Pregnant women. • Adults over 50. • Anyone with a chronic medical condition. • Healthcare workers and emergency personnel. • Anyone who lives with or cares for a person in high risk group. | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Pregnant women • People 6 months to 24 years old • Healthcare workers and emergency personnel • Adults 24-64 years old with underlying medical conditions • Anyone who lives with or cares for a person in high risk group. |
| Immunity | Those with vaccine or previous history will not become ill | No vaccine available yet – only older adults have any protection |