

H1N1 Flu and You

January 13, 2010



National Influenza Vaccination Week is January 10-16

by Dr. Jason Eberhart-Phillips, State Health Officer and Director, KDHE Division of Health



National Influenza Vaccination Week takes place January 10-16. Pandemic flu activity is down, but the H1N1 virus is still here and is likely to remain with us through the winter months. In January there is a window of opportunity to get more people vaccinated, before an anticipated third wave of flu activity.

Flu seasons typically peak in February. In 1957-58 the big wave was in October, just like in 2009, but

there was another wave late in the winter. No one can say what will happen now, but there is plenty of opportunity for this pandemic to come roaring back. We estimate that two-thirds of the Kansas population has neither had the vaccine nor the disease, and remains susceptible.

The vaccine is an excellent match to the virus; it works very well and it is safe. Beyond that, it is finally here in ample supply for everyone who wants it. Between October 1 and January 11, the Kansas Immunization Program (KIP) at KDHE facilitated the shipment of more than 866,000 doses of vaccine to public health departments, health care providers and retail pharmacies across the state. More vaccine is being shipped each week. Up-to-date information on H1N1 vaccination clinics being held in Kansas can be found by going to www.kdheks.gov and clicking on "Where can I receive the H1N1 vaccine?"

Although the vaccine is now available to everyone, people in certain groups who have not yet gotten vaccinated should especially make a point of doing so. Health care workers who have contact with patients, for example, are at greater risk because they treat severely sick people. In addition, if large numbers of health care staff get sick all at once, this jeopardizes the ability of all patients to receive needed care.

It is also urgent for people between the ages of 25 and 64 who have asthma, diabetes or certain other conditions to understand that their risk for severe complications is high, and to protect themselves by getting vaccinated. This applies even in cases where a person's condition is well-controlled.

In addition, it is essential that families take steps to protect their youngest members from pandemic H1N1 flu, because they are at greater risk. To maximize effectiveness of the vaccine for children ages six months through 9 years, two doses must

be administered. The second dose should be given four weeks after the first. Because no flu vaccine is effective for infants six months of age and younger, caregivers should be vaccinated in order to protect the infant against the spread of the virus.

Women who are pregnant are also at higher risk and more likely to be hospitalized if they catch H1N1 flu, and should therefore be vaccinated. When a pregnant woman gets a flu shot, it can protect both her and her baby. Caregivers of infants under six months born to a mother who was vaccinated while pregnant should still be vaccinated against H1N1.

Like some other pandemic flu viruses before it, the 2009 H1N1 influenza A virus is having a significant impact on younger people, including those in the 19-24 age range. It's easy to understand how young adults might not think they are at any great risk from a flu virus, since this is not normally the case. However, the best evidence we have shows that people ages 19-24 are indeed at greater risk, and should get vaccinated.

People 65 years and older should also be sure to get vaccinated. As is the case with other flu viruses, seniors have a higher risk of developing complications if they catch the pandemic H1N1 virus, although people in this age range apparently are at lower risk of catching the virus in the first place. According to the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC), laboratory tests conducted on blood samples indicate that some older people probably have some pre-existing immunity to the 2009 H1N1 flu virus. Nevertheless, there have been severe H1N1 infections and deaths in every age group, including among older people. If you are 65 or older, you should also seek medical advice right away if you develop flu symptoms to find out if you might need treatment with prescription antiviral medications. People 65 and older are prioritized to get these drugs if they become sick with H1N1.

Kansans who have questions about H1N1 or the vaccine should call the Kansas H1N1 Hotline at 1-877-427-7317 during normal business hours, email H1N1fluinfo@kdheks.gov, or visit www.kdheks.gov.

Yours sincerely,

Jason Eberhart-Phillips, MD, MPH
Kansas State Health Officer
Director, Division of Health, KDHE