

H1N1 Flu and You

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H1N1 Flu Vaccine: Now is the Time

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



If you've been putting off getting the vaccine against H1N1 flu, you needn't wait any longer.

In the past month, supplies of the H1N1 vaccine have doubled. Both the injected and nasal spray forms of the vaccine are now available in more places from more providers than at any time since immunization activities began in early October.

The vaccine is remarkably effective in preventing disease, almost perfectly matched to protect us against the target virus. And new data show that the H1N1 vaccine is also incredibly safe.

Pregnant women, children and those with chronic medical conditions remain the priority groups for vaccination, but many Kansas counties have recently expanded availability to everyone who wants it. If predicted supplies materialize in coming weeks, there won't be a shortage of the vaccine in any Kansas community.

So what are you waiting for? Three reasons come to mind:

Perhaps you don't think that H1N1 flu is a serious enough disease to bother getting the vaccine. True, several new analyses of the mortality associated with this novel virus suggest that it is about 100 times less lethal than the strain that caused the 1918 pandemic, with only one death occurring in every 2000 cases.

But consider this: While this flu bug doesn't kill a large share of the population it infects, it infects so many people that nearly 10,000 Americans have so far died from H1N1-related causes. Another 213,000 are thought to have been hospitalized, most of whom are much younger than those who typically suffer serious flu infections in a normal year.

If you can avoid even a small risk of hospitalization or death from H1N1 flu with a single dose of a safe vaccine, what have you got to lose in getting immunized?

Perhaps you believe that the epidemic is over, so that immunization isn't necessary. True, virus activity has dropped off sharply in Kansas and most other states since peaking in late October. Doctors and hospitals are seeing significantly fewer patients with flu-like illnesses now, and absenteeism in schools and workplaces has returned to normal levels.

But consider this: While autumn's so-called "second wave"

of H1N1 flu is clearly over, pandemics are notorious for re-emerging in unpredictable ways. Many experts believe that a third wave is coming, perhaps in response to holiday travel and the return of millions of schoolchildren in January.

Three-quarters of Kansans have neither had this disease nor gotten the vaccine. That leaves about two million people in Kansas who remain susceptible to infection, more than enough human hosts to sustain a large third wave of infections.

Why take your chances with a possible third wave? Every additional vaccine given now will reduce the odds of a serious re-emergence of the pandemic later this winter.

Perhaps you are unsure about the safety of the vaccine. True, the vaccine was licensed for use on millions of people after clinical trials could demonstrate safety on only a few thousand study participants. While there was every expectation that the new vaccine was as safe as each year's seasonal flu vaccines, there has always been a slight possibility that a rare, unanticipated side effect would emerge.

But consider this: It hasn't happened. As of December 4th, after nearly 64 million doses of vaccine had been distributed, fewer than 5,000 reports of possible adverse reactions had been reported to federal authorities. That's less than one-hundredth of one percent reporting a problem. Of those, all but 277 reactions have been classified as "non-serious," such as soreness at the site of injection. Among the reports that could be considered serious health problems, no unusual events or patterns have emerged. The reported events do not appear to have a common cause, and are most likely coincidental with vaccination, but safety monitoring continues.

While no vaccine, or any medical intervention, is completely without risk, the H1N1 vaccine is proving to be a very safe and very effective product. This much is certain: getting the vaccine is far safer than getting infected with the pandemic virus.

So I ask you again: What are you waiting for?

Yours sincerely,

A handwritten signature in black ink that reads "Jason Eberhart-Phillips MD". The signature is written in a cursive style.

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