

Separating fact from fiction regarding swine flu pandemic

September 2 2009, by Tom Vasich



An H1N1 flu vaccine is expected to be available by mid-October. Due to its limited supply, high-risk people and public health workers will have priority.
Image: Michelle S. Kim

Novel H1N1 influenza, better known as swine flu, reached pandemic status in June, but many public health experts believe its threat may peak with the flu season this fall. As a vaccine is being developed, communities are emphasizing common-sense prevention and finalizing large-scale response plans should H1N1 sicken millions.

Dr. Kristi Koenig, director of [public health](#) preparedness for UC Irvine Healthcare and UCI clinical emergency medicine professor, works on the front lines of this flu battle. She's a sought-after international expert on disaster readiness and response and emergency medical services. Here, Koenig discusses the looming H1N1 threat:

Q. What is it about H1N1 flu that concerns so many people?

A. The biggest challenge with any new virus is uncertainty about how it will behave. Public health officials are closely monitoring the Southern Hemisphere, which is currently in its flu season, for clues to how the virus will act here this fall. Many health professionals are concerned there could be a second wave of H1N1 flu during our regular flu season this fall and winter, but we don't know yet how severe this will be.

Q. Who is most endangered by the H1N1 virus?

A. The majority of young, otherwise healthy people recover completely from H1N1 flu with basic care. Those at [greatest risk](#) (pdf) for extreme illness are children under 5, the elderly, pregnant women and people with compromised immune systems (such as cancer or AIDS patients). High-risk persons should contact their doctor right away if they think they've been exposed to H1N1 flu, as they may need medication to help ward off infection.

Q. An H1N1 vaccine - although fewer doses than hoped - is expected to be available by mid-October, the traditional start of the [flu season](#). How important is it to be vaccinated?

A. It's very important for susceptible people to talk to their doctors about being vaccinated when the vaccine becomes available. Vaccination, though, is only one strategy to prevent H1N1 flu. There are other things you can do: Avoid sick people, cover your cough, wash your hands frequently and stay home if you are ill. Because this is a new virus, information can change rapidly. Monitor the news carefully and follow public health advice.

Q. Should people feeling sick go to an emergency room?

A. Call 911 or go to the emergency room if serious symptoms develop - such as rapid breathing or shortness of breath; bluish or gray skin color; persistent vomiting and inability to keep down fluids; abnormal behavior or irritability in small children; and chest pressure or pain - or if flu symptoms recur with fever and a worse cough.

Q. Can the U.S. healthcare system handle a flu pandemic?

A. Our emergency healthcare system suffers from severe crowding on a daily basis, and managing a large number of additional patients will be very challenging. But we have excellent plans at the local, regional, [statewide](#) (pdf) and national levels to cope with a pandemic like this. We've been preparing for just this scenario for many years.

Q. A number of media outlets have reported that “swine flu parties” are growing in popularity. Are these a good idea?

A. “Swine flu parties” intentionally expose attendees to people with H1N1 flu so they too will become infected. The idea is that having a mild illness now will give them natural immunity protection in case the virus becomes more deadly in the future. It is not a good idea to participate in these events; anyone with [swine flu](#) should avoid close contact with other people.

Provided by University of California, Irvine

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