

H1N1 Flu Vaccine: Setting the Record Straight

A new vaccine for novel H1N1 flu will be available this fall. People have expressed a number of questions and concerns about the new vaccine. Here are some answers to help set the record straight.

Will I be required to get the vaccine?

No, it will not be a state mandate.

Minnesota law, Minn. Stat. §12.39 says that individuals have a “fundamental right to refuse medical treatment, testing, physical or mental examination, **vaccination**, participation in experimental procedures and protocols, collection of specimens, and preventive treatment programs.”

Before receiving the H1N1 flu vaccine, you will get a federally-required fact sheet, called a vaccine information statement (VIS). It covers the risks and benefits of the vaccine.

Is this new H1N1 flu vaccine “experimental” -- or is it like the flu vaccine we get every year?

The H1N1 flu vaccine is just like the yearly (seasonal) flu vaccine, which is reformulated every year to protect against different flu viruses. This one just happens to be formulated to protect against H1N1 novel flu virus. It’s manufactured using the same process and facilities. It is in no way “experimental.”

How do we know the vaccine is safe?

As they do each year with “seasonal” flu vaccine, the federal government is taking precautions to ensure that the vaccine is safe. The H1N1 flu vaccine has undergone clinical trials. That’s done to ensure its safety and efficacy for both children and adults, including pregnant women. As with seasonal flu vaccine, the federal Food and Drug Administration (FDA) will require the same process for release of H1N1 flu vaccine. Once vaccination starts, the U.S. Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) and the Minnesota Department of Health (MDH) will also be closely monitoring for any side effect associated with the vaccine.

Can you get H1N1 flu from the vaccine?

No. The virus in your H1N1 flu shot will be inactivated (killed), so it cannot cause the disease. If you get the vaccine in nasal spray form (“FluMist”), the virus will be alive but weakened, so it can’t grow in the lungs and cause illness.

Flu vaccinations are usually done at the same time of year when colds and other viruses are circulating, so it’s easy to mistake something else for the flu. Some people also get aches, and less often, a mild fever for a short time after getting a flu shot. This is a normal response. None of this means you have gotten the flu from the vaccine. Repeated studies have shown that the live nasal vaccine will not cause illness.

Will the flu vaccine I get every year protect me against H1N1 flu?

Unfortunately, no. Seasonal flu is different from H1N1 flu so seasonal flu vaccine won’t work against H1N1 flu. You will need to get two different vaccines this flu season, one for seasonal flu and one for H1N1 flu. Children under 10 years old will need to get two doses of the vaccine for H1N1.

Will some people be able to get the H1N1 flu vaccine before others?

The federal government has recommended that certain groups of people get H1N1 flu vaccine when it first becomes available because they are the ones most affected by the disease. These people include:

- pregnant women,
- people who live with or care for children younger than 6 months of age,
- healthcare and emergency medical services personnel,
- persons between the ages of 6 months and 24 years, and
- persons between the ages of 25 through 64 years who are at higher risk for the disease because of chronic health disorders or compromised immune systems.



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Why aren't people age 65 years and older on the priority list to get the H1N1 flu vaccine?

The majority of H1N1 flu cases are in people under 50 years old and the average age of hospitalization for H1N1 flu is 37 years of age. Scientists believe that people over 50 may have some immunity to H1N1 influenza.

H1N1 flu seems to be affecting younger persons more than the elderly, so CDC has not made vaccinating people age 65 years and older a priority.

However, CDC expects eventually to have enough vaccine for anyone who wants it. People age 65 years and older should be able to get vaccinated if they want to be.

Will the vaccine contain thimerosal?
Some of the vaccine will contain thimerosal, and some won't.

The goal of the vaccination program is to have enough doses to give to everyone who wants the vaccine. To do that, the majority of the H1N1 flu vaccine will come in multi-dose vials. They need to contain a preservative (thimerosal) so the vaccine is not contaminated. However, some vaccine will be packaged in single-dose syringes or nasal sprayers. Vaccine packaged in that way will *not* need a preservative (thimerosal), and are an option for young children and pregnant women.

Thimerosal has been used since the 1930s to prevent contamination of a vaccine and other medical products. Current scientific research reviewed by the Minnesota Department of Health and national health organizations shows no evidence of harm caused by small amounts of thimerosal in vaccines, beyond possible minor reactions like redness and swelling at the injection site. The Minnesota Department of Health has a fact sheet on thimerosal, available at www.health.state.mn.us/divs/idepc/immunize/hcp/thimerosalfs.html

What is an adjuvant? Will it be used in the H1N1 flu vaccine?

An adjuvant is a vaccine "additive." Its purpose is to increase the effectiveness of the vaccine by stimulating the immune system and "boosting" the body's natural immune response. Adjuvants can reduce the amount of vaccine needed to protect against disease. Using adjuvants could help us stretch the available supply of vaccine and make it go further.

However, there are no plans to include adjuvants in any H1N1 vaccines, injectable or nasal spray formulations, distributed in the U.S. in the 2009-10 season.

Is H1N1 flu really an emergency – or just a false alarm?

It appears that H1N1 flu illness is acting like seasonal flu illness, but unlike seasonal flu it is affecting people under 50 years of age, especially children. However, it is important to keep in mind that in an average flu season about 36,000 people die and a quarter of a million people are hospitalized every year. These numbers would be even higher if there were not a flu vaccine.

The concern with H1N1 isn't about how severe it is but that without the vaccination program the disease cannot be controlled. This means that more people may be hospitalized and there may be more deaths.

Where do I go for more information?

For more information about H1N1, visit the Minnesota Department of Health's Web site at: www.health.state.mn.us or call 651 201-5414 or toll free at 1-877-676-5414.