

# Swine Flu Q&A

by Jill Airola, M.D.



Since the first reported case of human infection with the H1N1 virus was made last spring, the general public has been overwhelmed with information – some of it conflicting -- about the swine flu and a developing vaccine. We asked local pediatrician Dr. Jill Airola with the Monterey Peninsula Pediatric Medical Group to weigh in on some of the most important issues of concern to parents with regard to this virus today.

**What is the “swine flu”?** The H1N1 virus is a new virus to the human community. In the past, this virus routinely caused illnesses in pigs and other swine. Viruses are masters of survival; they change or mutate in order to grow and infect living beings. The first reported case of human infection with H1N1 occurred in Mexico and then in the U.S. in March/April 2009. While the H1N1 virus is part of the Influenza A virus family, for which seasonal vaccines have been developed each year, this year’s seasonal flu vaccine will *not* protect someone from getting the H1N1/swine flu virus.

**What makes H1N1 a “global pandemic”?** The term “pandemic” does *not* refer to how severe an illness may be; it refers only to its ability to spread. Thus, in June 2009, the World Health Organization declared a global pandemic only due to the worldwide spread of the virus. The U.S. currently has reported more cases than any other country worldwide. However, most persons infected have recovered without requiring medical intervention or treatment. The people who have had more complications (secondary bacterial infections like pneumonia) have been pregnant women, persons under 24 years of age and those with chronic medical conditions.

**Do the swine flu and seasonal flu exhibit different symptoms?** No. Symptoms are the same. High fever and body aches are the predominant symptoms. Additionally, fatigue, cough and sometimes a little vomiting and diarrhea can be present.

**If I or my child get ill today, how do we know which type of flu (seasonal or swine) we have?** If you or your child exhibit flu-like symptoms *now*, you do not have the regular seasonal flu – you have the swine flu. We know this because the cases that are being tested are predominantly the H1N1 virus at this point in time. At our office, we are sending five specimens a week to be tested by the health department as a monitoring tool so that the community will know when the seasonal flu arrives.

**Are two flu vaccines really needed this fall?** Yes. Get the regular seasonal flu vaccine now. If you get sick right now, it will not be with the seasonal flu. If you have not gotten the H1N1 virus by the time its vaccine becomes available, then get that one, too.

**What can we do to avoid the swine flu besides getting the vaccine, when it’s available?** WASH YOUR HANDS! Also, avoid a room full of sick, coughing people (yes, like the doctor’s office!) unless absolutely necessary. Cover your mouth and teach your children to cover their mouths when coughing to keep those infectious respiratory droplets out of the air that others are breathing. Oh, and did I mention, WASH YOUR HANDS?!

**Should the “rush to market” with a swine flu vaccine be a cause for concern that the vaccine may not be safe?** The fast production of the swine flu vaccine and its rapid release does NOT mean that the necessary rigorous testing has not been done. There is much paperwork and waiting for new vaccines to be released for general public use. That is what has been eliminated in the swine flu vaccine and it’s pretty amazing that this can be done! I have complete confidence that, once released, the vaccine will be safe.

**What do I do if my child gets ill?** Fever control with Tylenol® or Motrin® will not only help with high fevers but also with body aches. Drink plenty of liquids and try to eat nutritious foods. Cover your mouth when you cough and WASH YOUR HANDS frequently. Keep your child at home 24 hours after he or she no longer has fever.

**Final thoughts....** On a daily basis, we all take risks. A major risk we take every day is driving in our cars; the potential for accidents while driving is present every time we jump into our cars to run errands, take the kids to school, etc. Your child’s risk of complications from the H1N1/swine flu is low. Be prepared with prevention (the vaccine) and good hygiene when ill. Be vigilant for the complications that might occur and keep in touch with your pediatrician for advice. If needed, visit your pediatrician to have your child checked.

For more information on this topic, including flu season updates, visit the following websites: American Academy of Pediatrics ([www.aap.org](http://www.aap.org)), Center for Disease Control ([www.cdc.gov](http://www.cdc.gov)) and Monterey Peninsula Pediatric Medical Group ([www.mppmg.com](http://www.mppmg.com)).

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