Flu advice is stressing vaccinations

The government and health care system are gearing up for an outbreak this fall of the H1N1 virus in addition to seasonal flu. Officials offered advice in an August 20, 2009 call hosted by the Department of Health and Human Services.

Health care workers are among 5 initial target groups for the H1N1 vaccination program to begin around October 15. The groups in no order of priority are:

- pregnant women
- household contacts and caregivers for infants <6 months of age
- health care and emergency medical services personnel
- persons aged 6 months to 24 years
- persons aged 25 to 64 with health conditions placing them at higher risk of flu complications.

Contraindications are the same as for the seasonal flu vaccine.

The government is making the vaccine and related supplies available to providers at no charge.

Get flu shots, clean hands

The Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) is emphasizing the need for health care workers to be vaccinated for both H1N1 (2 doses) and seasonal flu (1 dose). The Joint Commission is challenging facilities to reach a vaccination rate of 65% to 90%—much better than the 42% in 2005-2006. The commission requires hospitals to offer flu vaccine on-site (www.jcrinc.com/FLUChallenge/).

Some states are taking an aggressive stance. New York State is requiring health care workers to be vaccinated, saying it is a “patient safety issue.” In California, health care workers who opt out of flu shots must sign a form declining the vaccine.

Hand hygiene is another major focus, both in health care and in the community.

Employers are encouraged to tell their health care workers to stay home when sick. In communities with H1NI flu, the CDC says health care personnel with a fever and respiratory illness should stay out of work for 7 days or until symptoms resolve.

Infection control

The CDC’s interim infection control guidance for H1N1, issued in May 2009, was still in effect in late August. An updated guidance is expected, but when is not known.

The interim guidance considers H1N1 a “novel” flu virus. The CDC is still studying whether H1N1 is spread primarily through droplet transmission (ie, by sneezing and coughing) like seasonal flu or also via the airborne route. The flu is also spread by contact with contaminated surfaces.
For that reason, the interim guidance is conservative, recommending fit-tested N95 respirators for workers entering rooms of patients isolated for H1N1 flu and for aerosol-producing procedures like bronchoscopy, which should be performed in a negative-pressure room.

The updated H1N1 guidance is expected to place more emphasis on other precautions and less on respirators, a CDC official said during the call. Among other measures are screening patients for signs and symptoms and separating those with respiratory conditions.

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**Flu websites**

- [www.flu.gov](http://www.flu.gov)
  Main site for the health care community, employers, and others.

- [www.cdc.gov](http://www.cdc.gov)
  Click on the H1N1 link at the top of the page.