

Q&A About Seasonal and Pandemic H1N1 Flu Vaccinations

The 2009-10 flu season

The best way to prevent influenza or “the flu” is vaccination. It’s important to get a seasonal flu shot or nasal-spray vaccine as soon as they become available in the fall. The flu season is different this year because of the pandemic H1N1 flu virus, which is a new virus causing illness in people around the world. Very few people are immune to the H1N1 virus. There is a separate vaccine for pandemic H1N1 flu that requires an additional flu shot.

Should I get a flu vaccination?

Yes. It is highly recommended that you get both the seasonal flu shot and the pandemic H1N1 flu shot because they will protect you, your family, and the people you serve from getting the flu. There are different priority groups for each vaccine, but there will eventually be enough for everyone. If you have questions about getting a flu shot, consult your health care provider.

Seasonal flu is a serious disease that kills about 450 Oregonians a year. The new virus, pandemic H1N1 flu, has the potential to make millions sick in our country and around the world. Persons in certain age groups, those with underlying medical conditions, and pregnant women are at greater risk for complications from the flu. Most people, however, recover from the flu on their own, but it frequently makes you sick for a week to 10 days, with coughing and fatigue lasting longer.

Do I have to get a shot to be protected against the flu virus?

No, there are two forms of vaccine: a shot and a nasal spray. People not eligible for the nasal spray are those over 50 years old, pregnant women, people with chronic health conditions and young children under the age of 2. Talk to either your doctor or the person providing the vaccine about which one is better for you.

Is the H1N1 flu shot safe?

The pandemic H1N1 flu shot has been thoroughly tested and approved by the Food and Drug Administration. Each year three different flu viruses are chosen to be included in the seasonal flu shot. This year those three were chosen before the H1N1 virus was identified. The H1N1 virus is an additional fourth flu virus for which the new vaccine was developed. H1N1 vaccine is made in the same way as the regular seasonal flu vaccine. In testing, H1N1 vaccine has not shown any unusual side effects.

Can I get the flu from a flu shot?

No, a flu shot contains killed virus. The shot doesn’t contain any live virus. You may have a sore arm and feel somewhat crummy after the shot but that is caused by your immune system being “turned on” so it can fight the flu virus if you come into contact with it. You could mistake your body’s reaction as a mild case of the flu.

The nasal spray (FluMist®) does contain live virus but it has been weakened so that it also can’t cause a flu infection.

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Q&A (continued)

I have had the seasonal flu vaccine and still got the flu. Why is that?

First off, you may have been reacting to other infections. The flu vaccine only prevents influenza, an illness with cough, sore throat, usually fever, body aches, and, for some, diarrhea and vomiting. Influenza is not the 24-hour illness of vomiting and diarrhea that our mothers called the “stomach flu.” The flu vaccination also won’t prevent colds and other viruses.

It is also possible to catch a strain of flu that wasn’t chosen for the vaccine. Every year health officials make their best guess of what flu will circulate next year. Some years their guess wasn’t the best. It is also possible to have been exposed to the flu, get the shot, and not have had enough time for your body to develop immunity from the shot.

Who shouldn’t get the flu shot?

There are very small numbers of people who should not get the flu shot. Everyone should talk to their doctor or the nurse who gives the vaccination. Basically people who are allergic to eggs and those who have had a bad reaction to a previous flu shot should not get the standard flu shot. There will be limited flu vaccine available that was not grown in eggs. Those who can get the nasal spray are more limited. Again, talk to your health care provider.

Can getting the seasonal flu shot make the H1N1 illness worse or can getting the H1N1 vaccination make the seasonal flu worse?

No, getting one vaccination will not prevent the other type of flu and it won’t make it worse.

Can I get both shots at once?

Both can be given at once if both vaccines are available at the same time. It’s recommended that the nasal pandemic H1N1 vaccine and the nasal seasonal vaccine not be given at the same time.

Will it cost me anything to get the H1N1 vaccine?

The federal government has purchased all of the H1N1 vaccine that will be used in the country. Because it is funded by taxpayers, there is no charge for the vaccine itself. However, there may be an administration fee (*usually \$15 or less*), depending upon where you get the vaccination. Call the Oregon Public Health Flu Hotline, 1-800-978-3040, for a location near you.

For more information:

Oregon Public Health Division
www.flu.oregon.gov

Oregon Public Health Flu Hotline
1-800-978-3040

Oregon County Health Departments
www.oregon.gov/DHS/ph/lhd/lhd.shtml

Federal Pandemic H1N1 Flu Information
www.flu.gov

World Health Organization
www.who.in