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WELL

# Preparing for a Stressful Flu Season

By [TARA PARKER-POPE](#)

A few weekends ago, a mother I know called to ask about [swine flu](#) after her daughter complained of breathing trouble and other worrisome symptoms. Fortunately, my friend quickly reached her pediatrician, who reassured her about the child's condition.

But the conversation made me realize just how stressful this [flu](#) season is going to be for parents. Every snuffle and every [cough](#) is going to be scrutinized, awakening fears of the ominously named swine flu virus. How do you know when to relax? How do you know when to call the doctor?

Here are some answers to questions that will arise during what experts predict will be a very busy flu season:

## **How worried should we be?**

When this new strain of H1N1 [influenza](#) emerged last spring, experts feared that it might follow the pattern of the 1918 flu, the world's deadliest epidemic. That strain also showed up as a relatively mild spring virus but re-emerged in a more virulent form in the fall.

The new strain of H1N1 is not following that pattern. While it has accounted for about 90 percent of the flu virus circulating in the Southern Hemisphere, the strain is behaving a lot like seasonal flu, said Dr. Neil O. Fishman, an infectious-disease specialist at the [University of Pennsylvania](#).

"There is a sigh of relief that the virus hasn't mutated," Dr. Fishman told me. "Fortunately, the swine flu that we're seeing still is a moderate disease that is behaving very much like ordinary seasonal influenza."

That said, Dr. Fishman noted that the virus was unpredictable and could still mutate. So people need to be vigilant about washing their hands, and if they develop symptoms they need to stay home.

And “ordinary” flu is not to be taken lightly. Each year in the United States, about 200,000 people are hospitalized with severe flu symptoms, and 36,000 die.

### **Are children at higher risk for swine flu?**

A main difference between swine flu and seasonal flu is that people over 60 appear to have some [immunity](#) to swine flu, while younger people seem not to. And because children and young adults are more likely to gather in groups — at school and colleges — they are more vulnerable to catching all types of flu. So while the disease does not appear to be more severe than seasonal flu, a disproportionate number of young people will probably get it.

As with seasonal flu, some people will get very sick and some of them will die. Federal health officials report that at least 36 children in the United States have died of swine flu; most had nervous system disorders like cerebral palsy or developmental delays. Some, however, had been healthy; they died of bacterial infections that set in after the flu. Doctors speculate that children with nerve and muscle disorders can’t cough hard enough to clear the airways, putting them at higher risk for complications.

Each year seasonal flu kills 50 to 100 children, and it’s too soon to know whether swine flu will turn out to be more deadly. Up to 40 percent of children contract regular seasonal flu, said Dr. Nathan Litman, director of pediatric [infectious diseases](#) at the Children’s Hospital at Montefiore in New York City, who added, “We almost expect that as soon as school is open we’ll start seeing increased numbers.”

### **When will the swine flu vaccine be available? Will there be enough to go around?**

The federal government has ordered 195 million doses of vaccine. The [Centers for Disease Control and Prevention](#) recommends it for health care workers, children and young adults ages 6 months to 24 years, pregnant women and people caring for an infant younger than 6 months.

While there will be enough vaccine to cover the recommended groups, the timing will vary. The vaccine is undergoing clinical trials, and the first 40 million doses

or so should be available by Oct. 15. Thirty million more will be delivered by the end of October, and new batches each week after that.

The vaccine may require a second dose three weeks after the first, and it may take another two weeks for the body to build up full immunity, the C.D.C. says. That means those who receive flu shots in mid-October won't be fully protected until late November.

### **How do I get a swine flu shot?**

The government will distribute the vaccine through state health departments, which will send it to local health departments and doctors' offices. Check with your [family doctor](#) to find out when it will be available.

### **What about the severe complications that followed the last swine flu shots, given in 1976?**

In 1976, a swine flu vaccine was associated with Guillain-Barré syndrome (pronounced ghee-YAN bah-RAY), in which the body damages its own nerve cells, causing weakness and sometimes [paralysis](#). The reasons are unclear; some studies found no link. Another study suggested that one person in every one million vaccinated for seasonal flu might be at risk for Guillain-Barré.

In 1976, however, techniques for rapidly making vaccine were much less sophisticated than they are now. And Dr. Fishman noted that existing flu vaccines contain components of the H1N1 virus, so "I do not consider this a new vaccine — the vaccine is being made the same way that every [influenza vaccine](#) is made."

### **What are the symptoms of swine flu? When does it become an emergency?**

In children, the warning signs include fast or troubled breathing, bluish or gray skin, and persistent or severe [vomiting](#). If a child isn't drinking enough fluids, is unusually hard to wake up, is not interacting or is so irritable that he or she doesn't want to be held, you should call your doctor.

Adults with severe symptoms may also complain about pain or pressure in the chest or abdomen, sudden [dizziness](#) and confusion.

Children with underlying neurological problems should be quickly seen by a doctor if they run a [fever](#). In otherwise healthy children, the main warning sign is that the child seems to feel better, then appears to relapse with a high fever. This signals a bacterial infection that must be treated with [antibiotics](#). Even though such infections are seldom severe, the child should be seen by a pediatrician as quickly as possible.

### **Should I bother getting a seasonal flu shot?**

Yes. Seasonal flu is as much of a concern as it has always been. Given that swine flu shots won't be available until late in the season, a regular shot will protect you and your family from the body aches, cough and misery of seasonal flu, and allow you to cross one worry from your list.