

# Caring for Someone with H1N1 Flu

Many cases of H1N1 flu will not require hospitalization. Rather, they will be treated in the home.

This page includes information from Tanner Health System's Infection Prevention team and the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) to help educate individuals who may be caring for or living with someone who has H1N1 flu or flu-like symptoms.

Please read through this page and refer to it often to help reduce the risk that others in your home may contract H1N1 flu.

This page covers the following topics:

- Preventing the Spread of H1N1 Flu
- Creating a Sick Room and Containing Contamination
- Protecting Others
- Medication for H1N1 Flu
- Household Cleaning, Laundry and Waste Disposal
- Advice for Care Givers

## Preventing the Spread of H1N1 Flu

H1N1 flu appears to spread the same way that the seasonal flu spreads. Viruses such as the flu are spread from person to person through the coughing or sneezing of people who have the flu. People may become infected by touching something with flu viruses on it and then touching their mouth or nose.

H1N1 flu can present a wide range of symptoms, including fever, cough, sore throat, body aches, headache, chills and fatigue. In some cases, it may also cause diarrhea and vomiting. Severe pneumonia, respiratory failure and even death is possible with a H1N1 flu infection.

People with chronic medical conditions may develop a severe illness from a H1N1 flu infection. Bacterial infections may occur at the same time as the viral H1N1 flu infection, leading to pneumonia, ear infections and sinus infections.

There are some very simple steps you can take to reduce your risk of contracting the virus:

- Cover your nose and mouth with a tissue when you cough or sneeze, and throw the tissue away. If no tissue is available, cough into the bend of your elbow – not your hands.
- Wash your hands often with soap and water, especially after you cough or sneeze. You may also use alcohol-based hand sanitizer.
- Avoid touching your eyes, nose and mouth – these are places where germs are most likely to enter the body.
- Try to avoid close contact with people who are ill and showing flu-like symptoms, such as a fever, cough and sore throat.
- Practicing good health habits – such as receiving plenty of sleep, being physically active, managing stress, drinking plenty of fluids and maintaining a healthy diet – can keep your immune system strong and better protect you against infection.

When caring for someone who has or may have H1N1 flu in your home, it is important to protect yourself and others who are not sick. To do this:

- Remind the sick person to cover their coughs and wash their hands frequently with soap and water or use an alcohol-based hand sanitizer often, especially after coughing or sneezing.
- Have everyone in the household clean their hands frequently, either washing with soap and water or using an alcohol-based hand sanitizer.
- Ask your healthcare provider if others who have contact with the sick person should be placed on antiviral medications, such as oseltamivir or zanamivir to prevent the flu – this is particularly important for individuals who have chronic health conditions.

### **Creating a Sick Room and Containing Contamination**

It is very important to consider where the sick person should reside while ill, as this will reduce the spread of the virus throughout the household and limit contamination. You should take these steps to help protect others in the home:

- Keep the sick person away from other people as much as possible. If available, create a “sick room” for the person. This room should be separate from common areas of the house. A spare bedroom makes an ideal sickroom, particularly if it has its own bathroom. Be sure to keep the door to the sick room closed.
- Unless necessary for medical care, people who have the flu should never leave the house when they have a fever or during the period that they are most likely to spread their infection to others. This period includes seven days after the onset of symptoms in adults. Children may pass the virus for longer than seven days.
- If a person with the flu needs to leave the house, they should cover their nose and mouth when coughing or sneezing and wear a loose-fitting surgical mask, if available. Such masks are available at most pharmacies.
- If possible, sick people should use a separate bathroom. This bathroom should be cleaned daily with household disinfectant.

### **Protecting Others**

Keep this in mind to help prevent non-infected individuals from contracting the flu:

- Sick people should have no visitors other than care givers. A phone call is much safer than a visit.
- If possible, have only one adult in the house providing care for the sick person.
- Anyone who is pregnant should take special care to avoid exposure to the sick person; pregnant women are at an increased risk of flu-related complications and typically have reduced immune systems.
- Everyone in the household should clean their hands with soap and water or an alcohol-based hand sanitizer frequently, including after any contact with a sick person or places a sick-person has been.
- Use paper towels for drying hands after washing or dedicate separate cloth towels to each person in the house (for instance, give each person a different colored towel).
- If possible, consideration should be given to maintaining good ventilation in shared household areas. Keep windows open in restrooms, the kitchen, living room, etc.
- Antiviral medications can be used to prevent the flu, so check with your healthcare provider to see if someone in the house should be taking antiviral medication and how they can get a prescription for these drugs.

### Medication for H1N1 Flu

Some antiviral medications can help alleviate H1N1 flu symptoms. These drugs work by preventing the virus that causes the flu from reproducing inside the body, and can result in a shorter period of illness. However, these drugs are available by prescription only, and best benefit people with severe flu illness who require hospitalization.

A physician may also decide to prescribe antibiotics, since the viral infection caused by the H1N1 flu may also lead to bacterial infections.

Fevers and aches associated with the flu can be effectively treated with over-the-counter medications such as acetaminophen, ibuprofen or nonsteroidal anti-inflammatory drugs (NSAIDS). Aspirin may also be used, but should not be administered to children or teenagers unless otherwise directed by a physician. You should always follow the dosing instructions on the product's packaging, and never give more of the medication than the dosing instructions recommend.

Over-the-counter cold and flu medications may be used according to the package instructions to help lessen some symptoms, such as cough and congestion, but will not lessen how contagious a person is.

### Household Cleaning, Laundry and Waste Disposal

Sanitation is essential in preventing the spread of the flu virus. These steps can help maintain a cleaner, safer environment for everyone in the household:

- Discard tissues and other disposable items used by the sick person in the trash. Wash your hands with soap and water after touching tissues and similar waste.
- Keep surfaces – especially bedside tables, bathroom surfaces and children's toys – clean by wiping them down with a household disinfectant. Follow the disinfecting instructions on the product's label.
- Linens, eating utensils and dishes used by the person who is sick do not need to be cleaned separately, but they should not be shared without first being thoroughly washed.
- Wash linens, such as bed sheets and towels, with household laundry soap and tumble dry on a hot setting. Avoid "hugging" laundry prior to washing it. Clean your hands with soap and water or an alcohol-based hand sanitizer immediately after handling dirty laundry.
- Eating utensils should be washed either in a dishwasher or by hand with soap and water.

### Advice for Caregivers

It is important that one healthy, non-pregnant adult be designated as the "caregiver" for a sick person. This person, and this person only, should have exposure to the person who is sick and should be prepared to take special precautions to ensure they do not spread the virus to others in the house or become infected themselves. These steps may help:

- Avoid being face-to-face with a sick person.
- If holding small children who are sick, place their chin on your shoulder so they will not cough in your face.
- Clean your hands with soap and water or an alcohol-based hand sanitizer after every contact with the sick person, including the sick person's room or things that person may have touched or upon which they may have coughed or sneezed.
- A caregiver is more likely to catch the flu than others in the house, and they may be contagious – able to spread the flu to others – before they begin showing symptoms. To prevent spreading the flu, caregivers should wear a mask when they leave their home to prevent spreading the flu to others in case they are in the early stages of infection.

Speak with your healthcare provider about taking antiviral medication to prevent the caregiver from catching the flu. Monitor yourself and other members of the household for flu symptoms. If someone begins to show symptoms, **call the state's toll-free hotline at 1.888.899.9788.**