
Peter L. Beilenson, M.D., M.P.H., Health Officer

H1N1 (Swine Flu): Tips for Taking Care of a Sick Person at Home

This document is up to date as of 9/08/2009 12:00:00 PM

The following information comes from the Maryland Department of Health and Mental Hygiene (DHMH) and the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC)

What are the symptoms of H1N1?

Fever and one or more of the following:

- Cough
- Sore throat
- Body aches
- Headache
- Chills and fatigue
- Sometimes vomiting and diarrhea

Who is most at risk should they get sick with H1N1?

Anyone can get the flu. But the groups below should call their doctor right away if they have the signs of H1N1.

- Children less than 5 years old;
- Persons aged 65 years or older;
- Children and teens (less than 18 years) who are on long-term aspirin therapy;
- Pregnant women;
- Adults and children who have chronic diseases;
- Adults and children who have HIV or immune system problems;
- Residents of nursing homes and other chronic-care places.

When should I call my doctor?

You should take care of yourself at home like you would any illness. Drink lots of clear fluid, take medicine to lower your fever, and rest. If possible, stay home from work, school, and errands when you are sick. You will help prevent others from getting sick. People with the flu should stay away from others until at least 24 hours after their fever is gone. The fever should be gone without the use of a fever-lowering medicine.

If you are a member of an at-risk group listed above, you should call the doctor if:

- You or a family member has flu-like symptoms, including a fever that is higher than 100°F (37.8°C) AND a cough, sore throat, runny nose, or stuffiness.

What if I do not have a regular doctor?

If you meet the symptom checklist listed above and you do not have a regular doctor, call one of our local urgent care centers.

A list of urgent care centers located in Howard County is available at http://www.howardcountymd.gov/Health/docs/Urgent_care_centers.pdf

When should I call an ambulance or get emergency room care for a sick adult?

A sick adult may need medical help right away if he or she:

- Has bluish skin or lip color (for fair tones) and grayish skin or lip color (for darker tones).
- Has sudden dizziness or confusion.
- Is not drinking enough fluids.
- Is vomiting and unable to keep liquids down.
- Is not waking up or not interacting normally.
- Has flu-like symptoms improve but then return with fever and worse cough.
- Has a fever with a rash.
- Is unable to urinate for a long period of time.
- Has seizures.
- Has difficulty breathing or shortness of breath.
- Has pain or pressure in the chest or belly.

When should I call an ambulance or get emergency room care for a sick child?

A sick child may need medical help right away if she/he has any of the signs above or:

- Is being so irritable that he or she does not want to be held.
- Is not able to urinate, or in infants, has a lack of tears when they cry.
- Is less alert than normal or becomes confused.

How can I best take care of someone who may have H1N1?

The best thing to do is to take care of them at home. Ask sick family members to:

- Avoid close contact with family members who are healthy.
- Stay in their room while they are sick and stay away from other family members until at least 24 hours after fever is gone. The fever should be gone without the use of a fever-lowering medicine.

- Stay at home while sick even if they are using antiviral drugs.
- Avoid touching their eyes, nose and mouth. Germs spread this way.
- Get plenty of rest.
- Drink plenty of clear fluids (such as water, broth, and sports drinks).
- Wash their hands often with soap and warm water for 20 seconds. Alcohol-based gels like Purell also work and are good to use if soap and water are not available.
- Cover their mouths and nose with a tissue or the inside of their elbow when they cough or sneeze. Make sure to put used tissue in the trash after one use.
- Check with their doctor about special care they might need. This is especially true if they are pregnant or have diabetes, heart disease, asthma, or emphysema.
- Check with their doctor about whether they or other family members should take antiviral medicine.
- Be watchful for emergency warning signs.

How can I prevent other family members from getting sick?

If possible, take the following steps:

- Have only one adult in the home take care of the sick person.
- Keep the sick person in a room separate from the common areas of the house. (For example, a spare bedroom with its own bathroom)
- Keep the sickroom door closed.
- You may want the sick person wear a surgical mask if they need to be in a common area of the house near other people.
- Have the sick person use a separate bathroom. This bathroom should be cleaned daily with household cleaners.
- Have everyone in the household wash their hands often. Use soap and water or an alcohol-based gel like Purell. Make sure to wash hands after every contact with the sick person or going into the sick person's room or bathroom.
- Use paper towels for drying hands after hand washing or use one cloth towel for each person in the household. For example, use different colored towels for each person.
- Watch family members for symptoms and contact your doctor if symptoms occur.

Is it okay for a sick person to have visitors over to the house?

The sick person should not have visitors other than caregivers. A phone call is safer than a visit.

What if I'm the caregiver? What steps should I take to keep from getting sick?

- If you are pregnant – you should avoid being the caregiver. Pregnant women are more at risk of complications from the flu and your ability to fight off infection can be weakened while you are pregnant.

- Avoid being face-to-face with the sick person. Try to stay at least 6 feet from the sick person.
- If you must have very close contact with the sick person, you may want to wear a surgical mask. The masks may be available at many hardware stores and supermarkets.
- When holding small children who are sick, place their chin on your shoulder so that they will not cough in your face.
- Wash your hands with soap and water or use an alcohol-based gel like Purell after you touch the sick person or handle used tissues or laundry.
- Watch for your own symptoms and contact your doctor if symptoms occur.

How should I take care of the sick person's laundry, trash and room?

- Throw away tissues in the trash after one use. Wash your hands after touching used tissues and similar waste.
- Keep surfaces like bedside tables and the bathroom clean by wiping them down with a household cleaner (like Clorox or Lysol wipes). Make sure to read the directions.
- The sick person's bed sheets and towels, knives and forks, dishes, and cups for drinking do not need to be cleaned separately. Make sure these items are not used by anyone else without washing them first.
- Wash the sick person's bed sheets, towels, and clothes by using laundry soap and tumble dry on a hot setting. Clean your hands with soap and water or alcohol-based gel like Purell right after touching dirty laundry.
- Knives and forks, dishes and cups for drinking can be washed in a dishwasher or by hand with water and soap.

Where can I go for more information?

Howard County Health Department – <http://www.hchealth.org/>
The Health Department will update our website regularly about H1N1.

For more information, we recommend that you go to the following websites:

The Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC)
<http://www.cdc.gov/h1n1flu/>

The State of Maryland
<http://www.dhmdh.md.gov/swineflu/index.html>