

Chris Swingle • Staff writer • October 27, 2009

People who develop flu symptoms shouldn't head for a doctor's office or hospital, two Monroe County doctors said Monday. Cases of H1N1 flu, also called swine flu, are increasing in the Rochester area, just as the vaccine trickles into town.

Most people with flu will recover well if they stay home, rest, drink lots of fluids, use a humidifier to keep nasal mucus loose and treat fever with over-the-counter Advil or Tylenol, said Dr. Neil Herendeen, director of outpatient pediatric practices for Golisano Children's Hospital at Strong, and Dr. Ghinwa Dumyati, Monroe County Health Department epidemiologist.

Exceptions would include patients who develop severe illness and people at high risk for complications.

Who should call their doctor when flu-like symptoms start?

Pregnant women and women up to two weeks postpartum (including after pregnancy loss), people of any age with chronic health conditions such as asthma or diabetes or weakened immune systems, children younger than 2, children and teens younger than 19 on long-term aspirin therapy and people 65 and older should call to see whether they need prescription antiviral medication. Antivirals are most effective when given early.

Who needs urgent medical attention?

In fewer than 5 percent of cases, H1N1 patients develop more serious illness. Emergency warning signs include fast breathing or trouble breathing, pain in the chest, blue or gray lips or skin, severe or persistent vomiting, not waking up or not interacting appropriately with others, a child so irritable that he doesn't want to be held, and improvement of flu-like symptoms that then return with fever or worse cough.

How widespread is the flu?

No Rochester numbers exist. But three trends indicate a rising incidence of H1N1 flu here, said Herendeen. At selected pediatric offices where every case of flu-like illness is cultured for surveillance purposes, H1N1 is causing about half of respiratory illnesses. Pediatric offices are getting more calls about cough and fever symptoms, and schools are seeing more influenza-like illness. The increase in cases is like what happens every year with seasonal flu, but H1N1 is hitting earlier and is affecting a younger population.

Nationally, Centers for Disease Control and Prevention officials estimate that flu illness is as widespread now as at the winter peak of a normal flu season. More than 1,000 deaths related to the flu have been reported, including nearly 100 children, and more than 20,000 people have been hospitalized with flu complications. Of the cases tested to identify the type of virus, nearly all are the new H1N1 flu.

Where's the H1N1 vaccine?

Vaccine is being allocated based on population and is arriving in smaller amounts than originally projected for this time. This is the first week of scheduled deliveries in the Rochester area, although some vaccine was received early by some medical offices. Doctors' offices may have phone recordings or Web sites providing updates. County officials won't plan large clinics until supply is sufficient.

How is vaccine being distributed?

Plans are adjusted frequently based on quantities received. Dumyati said the health department may recommend how to prioritize initially within the high-risk groups.

Will it be worth getting vaccinated later?

Seasonal flu usually hits in January and is gone in about six to eight weeks; it's too soon to tell how H1N1 flu will go. The 1918 flu pandemic came in three waves, the third of which was during the winter, said Dumyati.

How long will vaccine protection last?

H1N1 protection is expected to last many months. Seasonal flu vaccine is needed annually because protection wanes and because the vaccine is updated to match the expected strains of flu of that year.

Which illness is it?

Symptom	Cold	Allergies	Flu
Fever	Rarely	Never	Usually high (100 to 102 F) for 3 to 4 days
Chills	Rarely	Never	60 percent of cases have chills
Cough	Usually (mucus-producing)	Sometimes	Usually (dry cough), can become severe
General aches and pains	Sometimes, slight	Never	Usually, often severe
Headache	Sometimes	Sometimes	Prominent
Fatigue	Sometimes, mild	Rarely	Usually moderate to severe, for up to 3 weeks
Extreme exhaustion	Never	Never	Early and prominent
Itchy eyes	Rarely	Usually	Rarely
Sneezing	Usually	Usually	Sometimes
Sore throat	Usually	Sometimes	Sometimes
Runny nose	Usually	Usually	Sometimes
Stuffy nose	Usually for one week	Usually	Sometimes
Timing	Symptoms tend to develop over a few days.	Symptoms often vary with season, can last for months.	Hits hard and suddenly, within 3 to 6 hours.
Duration	2 to 14 days	Starts at same time each year, can last for months.	4 to 14 days; cough can last longer
Cause	Virus	Pollens and other allergens, dust mites, dander	Virus
Complications	Sinusitis or ear infection	Rarely	Pneumonia, bronchitis. Can be life-threatening.
Treatment	Rest, fluids and time	Antihistamines, nasal steroids	If at risk for complications, contact a doctor for antiviral drugs (within 24 to 48 hours of symptom onset). If not at risk, stay home, rest, drink fluids.
Prevention	Good hygiene, hand washing	Limit exposure	Hand washing, annual flu vaccination