

Sample Op-Ed for Local Publications

8/3/2009

Right now, parents everywhere are preparing for a new school year, finding out who their children's teachers will be, buying school supplies, and seeing the doctor to make sure their kids are healthy and ready to learn.

But if you're a parent, you need to add one more item to that back-to-school checklist: what to do if someone in your family gets the flu.

This fall—as every fall—we not only have to plan for a new version of seasonal influenza, but in addition, another potentially serious strain, the 2009 H1N1 virus.

We first saw the new H1N1 virus in the U.S. last April, but the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) continue to report higher than normal levels of flu-like illness and actual H1N1 outbreaks in some parts of the country. That's very unusual at this time of year.

CDC estimates so far we've had more than 1 million cases of H1N1 in the United States. Similar to seasonal flu, with H1N1 you'll get a fever, cough, sore throat, stuffy nose, achiness, headache, chills and fatigue. Sometimes H1N1 causes diarrhea and vomiting. Just like seasonal flu, it can be severe and potentially deadly.

H1N1 can be dangerous for a person with an underlying medical condition—such as asthma or diabetes—or if you're pregnant. So far, it's been most contagious among children and young adults age six months to 24 years. Health care workers, emergency responders, and people caring for infants should be on guard.

Scientists believe this virus could worsen with the arrival of school. But if we prepare for the virus now, it does not have to.

Some of these precautions are simple and personal. Make it a routine to wash your hands often with soap and water. Cough into your elbow or into a tissue, not in your hands.

Stay home if you're sick, and start planning now in the event that one of your kids gets the flu. And ask yourself these questions: If you work, have you made

arrangements for child care? Have you talked with your employer about what to do in case you need to be out?

Some preparation is community-wide. If you're an employer, now is the time to plan to meet your objectives with a reduced staff. You do not want an employee who is ill to spread flu in the workplace.

If you're a medical provider, don't risk being overloaded and overburdened. An outbreak will not only bring people who have H1N1 into hospitals and doctors' offices—you'll also see the "worried well." Plan now to deal with the influx of patients that could come with an outbreak.

At the national level, scientists at the National Institutes of Health, the CDC, and the Food and Drug Administration are working with vaccine manufacturers to make sure that an H1N1 vaccine is not only safe, but that the virus is not changing in ways that would reduce a vaccine's impact. They expect to have a vaccine ready this fall.

If you want more information, please visit www.flu.gov. The site provides guidance to prepare for, prevent, and respond to an outbreak. It includes checklists and fact sheets that will help families and others make sure they are prepared.

Right now, flu.gov is posting a contest. Create a public service announcement to get the word out on flu prevention and post it to YouTube; you may win a \$2,500 cash prize. The contest is open to people age 14 and older. The deadline for submissions is August 17 at 11:59 PM.

To wrap up: a reminder. Wash your hands, cough in your sleeve, and stay home when you're sick. Get the vaccine when it's available. No one knows what the impact of the fall flu season will be until we're in the middle of it. But how severe the flu becomes this fall will depend on how seriously each of us takes action to reduce the risk now.

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