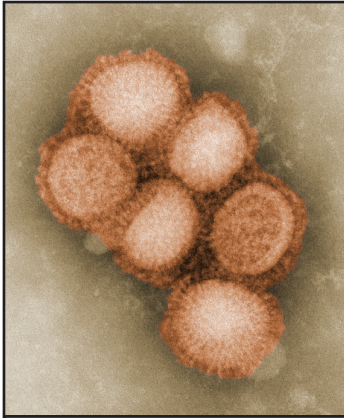




The H1N1 Pandemic: Keeping It in Perspective



Colorized, negative stained electron micrograph of the swine flu virus (Courtesy of the Public Health Image Library)

The H1N1 virus, otherwise known as the “swine flu”, has quickly become the most widely discussed public health issue in 2009. As H1N1 gathers momentum worldwide, governments have responded by suspending pork imports, slaughtering farm animals, screening tourists, closing schools and businesses, and banning public gatherings. There are still no cases identified in Alaska, but this will likely change, so let’s focus on what we should know and how we can prepare.

How serious is H1N1?

The CDC estimates that around

36,000 people die of seasonal influenza-related illnesses in the U.S. each year. As of May 2009, only 3,352 cases of swine flu confirmed in 45 states, with three deaths.¹ H1N1 appears less virulent than feared. However, H1N1 is a new virus. People have no antibodies against it, and a vaccine has not yet been perfected. Since viruses mutate quickly, it could become more virulent over time. Researchers are racing to track the spread of the virus, study its characteristics, and develop a vaccine.

Where did it come from?

H1N1 appears to have been evolving for decades. Characterized by a bizarre mix of human, avian and swine components, it sickened a youth in Sheboygan, WI, in 2005. In September, 2008 it reappeared suddenly in Mexico, but remained virtually unnoticed until March, 2009, when the number of cases escalated and patients started dying. Newsweek traced the path of the H1N1 pandemic and has suggested that H1N1’s evolution has probably been aided by industrial-scale pig farming in North America.²

A lesson from 1918

The infamous Spanish flu in 1918 killed around 50 million people worldwide over an 18 month period. To put this in context, total casualties resulting from World War 2, which lasted 5 years, are estimated at between 50 and 70 million. This explains why predicting a global pandemic can ignite an immediate panic in the media. However, the 1918 pandemic was exacerbated by government reluctance to let the public know the truth, because they feared it would shift the focus away from World War I, which was still in progress. It is now known that many of the victims were not killed primarily by the Spanish flu, but by malnutrition, and by secondary infections due to weakened immune systems. In many areas people were not informed of the pandemic, so when people started dying in large numbers, fear and panic set in, and those who remained healthy were afraid to take food and supplies to others who needed them. Society all but broke down.³ Where citizens are properly informed, trust their leaders, and know what to do, they are more likely to act locally to help end a pandemic.

Simple steps to stop the spread of H1N1

In fact, despite the hysteria, the media has done a good job of spreading the message that people can protect themselves quite effectively from infectious diseases by following a few simple steps that are well known to doctors. This was illustrated when families of New York school children, who had contracted H1N1 in Mexico, failed to catch the disease after being instructed by hospital doctors how to safely care for infectious patients in their homes.

- Wash your hands well and often even if you are healthy; ⁴ carriers are contagious 24 hours before showing symptoms
- Cough or sneeze into a paper tissue or the crook of your elbow
- Stay home and keep your children home if sick
- Wear a surgical mask if you must be in close quarters with sick people, or around others if sick yourself; ⁵ despite the publicity, these may be only rarely beneficial

Boost your immunity Past experience with pandemics shows they slow down over summer but may return with a vengeance in the fall. Research indicates vitamin D deficiency may be a major contributor to seasonal flu epidemics.⁶ You can strengthen your immune system by raising your vitamin D level to 50-70 ng/ml, avoiding sugar and processed foods, getting enough rest; minimizing stress, exercising regularly, eating garlic, and taking a good quality omega-3 oil.⁷

Screening & treatment Many people infected by H1N1 so far have suffered only mild symptoms. But a high fever, vomiting, and coughing to the point where breathing is difficult are reasons to seek medical help. A *DynaMed* review states that as of April 25th, this flu is 100% susceptible to oseltamivir (Tamiflu) or zanamivir (Relenza).⁸ They are being stockpiled across the country. These drugs can cause serious side effects in some people, and should be taken only when needed. For more information on all aspects of the epidemic, providers should check out a brand new one-stop website from Lancet.⁹

As with bear encounters, your best defense against a pandemic flu is your brain. Think critically about what you hear, act to protect yourself, help those around you, and above all, remain calm!

Resources

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6. “Avoid flu shots: Take vitamin D instead.” <http://tinyurl.com/48e7yn>
7. Winter wellness: 30 ways to beat colds and flu.” (2008-12) Turner, L. <http://tinyurl.com/raeou7>
8. *H1N1 flu: Updates from the DynaMed clinical summary*. <http://hldemo.ebscohost.com/DynaMed-SwineFlu/>
9. Lancet’s H1N1 Flu Resource Center. <http://www.TheLancet.com/H1N1-flu>