Swine Flu Not as Hard on Elderly as Seasonal Flu

By Lindy Taylor, MD

The swine flu is a type of Influenza A called H1N1. It was initially called swine flu because it was thought that it was transmitted to humans from pigs. Although that is not entirely true, the media continues to reference swine flu, though the Centers for Disease Control are now referring to the H1N1 flu.

H1N1 is just one of the many types of flu viruses and has been around at least since 1918. There have been mini-outbreaks of H1N1 flues several times since 1918, including the strain that surfaced in the 1940s and the 1970s. The 2009 H1N1 is a relative of these other types of H1N1 flu, but it has reconfigured itself as a "novel" strain.

H1N1 is not affecting the elderly the same way as it's affecting the young population who are suffering more hospitalizations and deaths than the elderly. This also happened in the late 1970s when the H1N1 strain affected mostly people under age 25.

Scientists are still trying to fully explain why this new flu has such a different pattern of infection than other common viral influenzas, but no one theory has been agreed upon to date.

In the 1940s, flu shots contained H1N1 antibodies but the virus changed so quickly the shots were not effective against the H1N1 the following years. Some scientists argue that people living in the 1950s and 1970s may have been exposed to a relative of our current H1N1 and may have partial immunity to it.

Many believe this new strain of flu is too new to be recognized by anyone previously exposed to H1N1 illness or prior H1N1 flu shots. Yet others try to explain the different patterns of infection by the way the immune system works for different age groups, explaining that stronger immune systems overreact and actually work against us. Regardless of the theories of explanation, the H1N1 flu is more strongly affecting people under age 50 and the seasonal flu is affecting those over age 50.

The seasonal "non-swine" flu continues to be the main threat to our elderly population. The seasonal flu causes approximately 200,000 hospitalizations and 36,000 deaths in the United States annually. Most of these cases affect people age 65 and older or the very young.

Our current seasonal flu shot is 80 percent to 90 percent effective at preventing non-swine flu in the elderly. The current flu shot is made of a dead virus and cannot give you the flu, despite what you might have experienced or heard in the past.

H1N1 flu shots will be available this fall. The federal and state governments are paying for and distributing the shots to county and Tribal governments. Additionally, they are mandating the priority list for who will receive these shots based on who is getting sick and dying from the H1N1 flu.

Our first priorities will be pregnant women, children, young adults, infant caregivers and other people with lung, diabetes and chronic medical conditions that make them more susceptible to disease.

Elders will not be on the first priority list because they are not getting and/or dying from H1N1 like the people mentioned above. It's currently thought, however, that 90 days after we start the H1N1 shot distribution, there will be enough vaccine for anyone who wants it.

This information changes daily and the clinic is diligently staying on top of the current flu information. We thank you for your understanding and your shared concern about vaccinating our high-risk, younger people first.

10 Ways You Can Help Stop the Flu and Stay Healthy

By Lindy Taylor, MD

1 Wash your hands frequently with soap and warm water for 20 seconds or use an alcohol-based hand sanitizer if soap and water are not available.

2 Avoid touching your nose, mouth and eyes (the T-zone of your face). This can introduce an infection into your body.

3 Cover your coughs and sneezes with a tissue or cough into your elbow. Make sure to throw tissues in the trash and wash your hands after sneezing or coughing.

4 Disinfect your surfaces with antiseptic cleaners like Lysol®, sanitary wipes or a bleach solution. You can easily make your own bleach cleaning solution using 1 teaspoon bleach to 1 quart of water. A little bleach goes a long way, but it's also toxic so be careful while handling it.

5 Drink plenty of healthy fluids. Water is the liquid of life; it makes up 75 percent of our bodies. It dilutes and helps flush toxins and other negative substances in our bodies. For those who are too bored of water alone, be smart in choosing fluids that hydrate you and give you beneficial amounts of needed calories and electrolytes.

6 Stay home if you are sick for at least 24 hours after your fever has resolved without the use of medication and you are symptom-free.

7 Get your flu shot!

8 Eat your veggies. Eating a balanced meal of the food groups ensures that you get nutritional value from foods to help you stay healthy. If you are like most people and fall short of the recommended six servings of fruits and vegetables per day, take a multi-vitamin.

9 Get your Zzzzzzz. Sleep is good medicine. Everyone needs different amounts of sleep each night. Know your body and what it takes for you to feel well-rested and to have enough energy to tackle the day ahead of you.

10 Be active! Active people are healthier people. Park farther away from the store entrance, use the stairs instead of the elevator, go on a walk after dinner and enjoy the nice weather, get outside with the kids, remind yourself why Oregon has the most photographed beaches in the country, go fishing, find a trail, join a gym, get creative and go play (it isn't just for kids!).

MRSA: Are You at Risk for this Bacterial Skin Infection?

By Lindy Taylor, MD

MRSA – methicillin-resistant staphylococcus aureus (MER-sah) – is bacteria that can cause skin infections. Sometimes, MRSA infects other parts of the body, but in the healthy population most MRSA infections are skin infections of varying severity.

MRSA is problematic because many of our traditional skin antibiotics can't treat MRSA because of its resistant ability, meaning it has changed itself over the years so that it's not susceptible to many of our common antibiotic medications.

MRSA used to be found only in nursing homes and hospitals, but the community-type of MRSA can be found anywhere, including gym benches and mats, and is more common among healthy children and adults than in the past.

Anyone can get MRSA, but some people are at higher risk:

- People who have crowded living conditions, poor hygiene and close contact among people
- Contact athletes and gym members
- Children in day care
- Military recruits and prisoners
- People with weak immune systems
- The elderly and very young

MRSA is spread the same way as other skin infections – by touching someone or something that has the bacteria on it and then touching yourself. Areas of skin break down, irritation or open wounds can let the bacteria in.

MRSA is a red rash that can look like:

- Sores that look and feel like spider bites
- Large, red, painful bumps under the skin
- A cut that is swollen, warm and filled with pus
- Fluid-filled blisters

MRSA can live on surfaces for months; however, it's killed through proper cleaning methods including antiseptic wipes and cleaners, anti-bacterial spray and alcohol-based sanitizing gels. A solution of 1 tablespoon bleach into 1 quart water is a good way to disinfect household surfaces.

The bacteria also are washed off the body with soap and water. This is especially important for athletes and gym members.

MRSA is a very treatable infection that always should be treated by a health care provider. It's important to follow the instructions for treatment your provider gives you. Your provider may drain the infection and/or give you antibiotics and special washing and wound covering instructions.

Be careful not to share personal hygiene items, such as towels, with anyone else.

Help Prevent Infections by Properly Washing Hands

- Wet your hands under warm running water.
- Apply soap and rub hands together for 15-20 seconds, getting between the fingers and around nails (yes, this is a long time!).
- Rinse soap off with warm running water.
- Dry hands with a paper towel or unused hand towel.
- Turn off the faucet using the paper or towel with which you dried your hands.
- Throw the paper in the trash.
- Wash your hands before preparing food, eating or drinking.
- Wash before and after touching your body, wounds or bandages.
- Wash your hands after sneezing or coughing.
- Wash your hands after going to the bathroom.
- Use hand sanitizer if no water is available.