



Talking with Children about the H1N1 (Swine Flu)

As the threat of H1N1 (Swine Flu) gains more public attention and media coverage, it's likely that children will hear something about it on television or at school. Here are some tips to help you minimize your child's fears while providing tips that can help him or her stay healthy.

Flu Worries and Your Child's Mental Health

Children are happiest when they can continue in the routines that make them feel comfortable and safe. Therefore, keeping your child inside and restricting social interactions with peers when flu rumors begin to circulate may be stressful for your child. By staying informed and teaching sensible precautions, you can keep life as normal as possible and help your child feel more secure.

What to Say

Find out what they know.

Ask your child to tell you what he or she already knows about the topic. Having your child tell you what she or he has heard, instead of you telling them about it, lets you know what misconceptions or misunderstandings you may need to address.

Explain the facts.

Your child may have a lot of questions about H1N1 (Swine Flu). Clearing up your child's confusion and providing the facts may make him or her less worried.

- Tailor the information to your child's developmental level, using words you know he or she will understand. (see simple definitions below)
- For example, you may wish to explain that H1N1 (Swine Flu) is a sickness that pigs can get and these germs that cause pigs to become ill can change over time to become a sickness that people can get and pass to each other.
- Be sure to explain that doctors and the government are working to protect everyone, and will be ready to treat children and families if the flu continues to spread quickly.

Talk about hygiene.

Having a discussion about flu provides an excellent opportunity to reinforce good hygiene practices, as they will not only help protect a child during a flu pandemic, but will also keep him or her healthier in general.

- Teach your child to wash hands frequently. The correct way to wash hands is to rub them vigorously together for 20 seconds using soap and water. Explain that hands pick up invisible little germs that can make people sick. The germs get inside when they touch their eyes, nose, or mouth. Washing with soap and water gets rid of the germs before they can make them sick. Another option is to use an alcohol-based hand sanitizer. Sanitizers with at least 70% isopropyl alcohol or 60% ethyl alcohol are effective.
- Teach your children to cover coughs and sneezes with tissues. Explain that the germs are caught in the tissue and can't get out where they can make other people sick. Make sure they know that they should throw away the tissue in a garbage and then wash their hands. Since many children do not carry tissues, you may want to remind them that if they have no tissue, it is ok to sneeze or cough into their elbow, so their hands don't get dirty and so the germs do not spread into the air.
- Teach your children to be careful not to get too close to others if he or she feels sick, or if the other person feels sick.
- Teach your child to practice good general health habits that help them stay healthy, like eating a balanced diet, exercising, and getting enough rest.

Flu Vaccine

If you take your child to get a yearly flu vaccine, he or she may wonder why everyone can't simply be vaccinated to keep from getting H1N1 (Swine Flu).

- If your child asks, explain that scientists have just started to work on developing a vaccine, but it can take several months to create it and make sure it works against *this* flu.

Containing the Flu

It is important that you help your child understand the directions being given by the schools, health authorities, and government to help prevent further spread of the flu and why they are important. Understanding that everyone, including children, can play a role in helping to prevent further spread of the flu can assist your child in feeling like he or she is contributing and helping the community.

If your child is not feeling well and seems to have symptoms of the flu, call your pediatrician. Follow your pediatrician's recommendations, including guidance about when to stay home from school.

Make a Plan

If a pandemic flu does emerge, anticipate that your child's routines may be interrupted. You may even find that authorities advise you to stay in your home to prevent the spread of the illness. Think about what you will need in the event that this occurs and make a plan for your family so that you are prepared. Stock up on food, water, and medications. Also have games, activities, and ways to communicate with friends (like over email) ready for your children to make the time spent confined at home less stressful. Providing developmentally appropriate art, play, and other expressive activities can assist your child to express how they feel and improve your communication with them while also providing entertainment or distraction while home.

Stay informed of recent developments.

- Check www.pandemicflu.gov or the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention website at www.cdc.gov frequently for updates.
- Use national and local pandemic hotlines that will be established if there is a global influenza outbreak.
- Listen to radio and television, and read media stories about the pandemic and follow the instructions of your local health authorities.

Common flu terms defined

Pandemic

- A pandemic is a global disease outbreak. The disease spreads easily from person to person and can sweep across the country and around the world in very short time.

Pandemic flu

- Human flu that causes a global outbreak of serious illness. This is different from the common flu because there is little natural immunity to this strain of the flu. This disease can spread easily from person to person.

Seasonal (or common) flu

- A respiratory illness that can be transmitted person to person. Most people have some immunity, and a vaccine is available.

Swine Influenza (H1N1 (Swine Flu))

- A respiratory disease of pigs caused by type A influenza viruses that cause regular outbreaks in pigs. People do not normally get H1N1 (Swine Flu), but human infections can and do happen. There is no human immunity and currently no vaccine is available, although scientists are working to develop one.

Additional resources on children, stress, and traumatic events are available from the ICHOC at www.childrensnational.org/ichoc under the Resource Section.

To find additional information about the H1N1 (Swine Flu) and precautions, please see [Facts about the H1N1 \(Swine Flu\)](#).