

Health Alert – Influenza Activity and Planning for Clinicians September 16, 2009

Illinois is beginning to experience an increase in influenza-like illness and laboratory confirmed influenza. Although the trajectory of influenza activity cannot be predicted with certainty, we should anticipate the potential for rapid spread and high demand on health care systems.

1) IDPH strongly suggests that all clinical facilities be prepared to implement their influenza response plans when a surge in demand for health care services due to influenza-like illness (ILI) begins to occur.

2) Make sure your plans address a surge of patients and increased demands for your services.¹ Consider using your telephone system to deliver messages to incoming callers about when to seek medical care at your facility, when to seek emergency care (see attached), and where to find information about caring for a person with flu at home at www.cdc.gov/h1n1flu/guidance_homecare.htm.

Please note that IDPH and the Illinois State Board of Education do not recommend requiring a physician visit or a note from a physician in order for students with ILI to return to school—currently permitted when afebrile (without use of antipyretics) for at least 24 hours while not taking antivirals.

3) Be prepared to provide 24/7 telephone triage of patients, so that emergency departments do not have to divert their attention to management of individuals who are not ill or are mildly ill.

4) While most influenza infections are mild, be prepared to provide rapid assessment and treatment in order to manage a) individuals at higher risk for severe illness and b) individuals with symptoms of severe illness (see attached). You are encouraged to assess respiratory rate and where possible, to do pulse oximetry for patients with typical influenza symptoms, in order to assess for evidence of serious illness.

5) Be prepared to screen patients for signs and symptoms of febrile respiratory illness at entry to the facility. If feasible, use separate waiting and exam rooms for patients with febrile respiratory illness. Plan to offer surgical masks to symptomatic patients who are able to wear them (adult and pediatric sizes should be available), provide facial tissues, receptacles for their disposal, and provide hand hygiene products in waiting areas and examination rooms. For information on caring for patients see: www.cdc.gov/h1n1flu/identifyingpatients.htm

6) Please review CDC guidance for antiviral treatment (<http://www.cdc.gov/h1n1flu/>), updated on September 8, 2009.

7) Please review attached information for the public on when to seek medical care that may be of use to you in communicating with your patients.

For current influenza guidance from CDC including clinical guidance, see: <http://www.cdc.gov/h1n1flu/>. For current Illinois influenza surveillance data, see http://www.idph.state.il.us/h1n1_flu/index.htm; for additional information, see <http://www.ready.illinois.gov>.

¹ Links to Spreadsheets for predicting surges in inpatient and outpatient services over the course of a pandemic will be posted on the IDPH website, at http://www.idph.state.il.us/h1n1_flu/sf_healthcare.htm

When to seek medical care for possible influenza, including 2009 H1N1 (swine) influenza

What is influenza?

Influenza (also known as the flu) is a contagious respiratory illness caused by flu viruses. Seasonal influenza and influenza H1N1 are both influenza viruses that can cause mild to severe illness. Influenza usually comes on suddenly and typically includes fever and cough or sore throat. Other symptoms may include headache, extreme tiredness, runny or stuffy nose, or muscle aches. Nausea, vomiting, and diarrhea are other flu symptoms and are typically more common in children than adults.

Does everyone with the flu need to see a health care provider or get tested and treated?

Most children and adults with the flu who are generally in good health will recover without needing to visit a health care provider. Some people may want to call their health care provider for advice on how to care for the flu at home.

I think I have the flu. Can I get tested and treatment for H1N1 influenza or seasonal flu?

Testing and treatment is not needed or recommended for most children and adults who get the flu. Antiviral medication is not currently recommended except for people with the flu who are at higher risk for complications (see below) or have severe illness.

Who needs to call or visit a health care provider?

Children and adults who are ill and at high risk for flu complications and people with more severe flu symptoms should call their regular health care provider or go to an urgent care clinic or emergency department if they cannot reach their health care provider. Whenever possible, **call** your health care provider to get advice on whether you need to be seen.

The best use of the emergency department is for individuals with symptoms of serious illness needing urgent attention; or ill individuals who are at increased risk for flu complications, and are unable to contact a health care provider.

General advice if you think you have the flu

If you are sick with the flu, you may be ill for a week or longer. Please stay home, except if you need medical care or other necessities, so you can get better and prevent others from getting ill. Drink plenty of fluids and rest as much as possible. Avoid travel.

Do not go to work or school until at least 24 hours after your fever is gone. Your fever should be gone without the use of fever-reducing medicine like acetaminophen (Tylenol) and ibuprofen (Motrin), or antiviral medications. Health care workers need to stay home for at least 7 days after symptom onset.

Wash your hands frequently with warm water and soap or use a hand sanitizer.

Cover your coughs and sneezes with a tissue or the sleeve of your elbow.

In general, avoid contact with other people as much as possible to keep from spreading your illness, especially those with one of the high-risk chronic conditions listed below.



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Who is at increased risk for flu complications?

People at increased risk for flu complications are:

- Children younger than 5 years old – particularly children younger than 2 years old
- Adults 65 years of age or older
- Pregnant women
- Persons with the following conditions:
 - Chronic diseases of the lung (including asthma), heart (except hypertension), kidney, liver, blood (including sickle cell disease), brain or nervous system, muscles (particularly those that cause difficulty with swallowing), or metabolism (including diabetes mellitus);
 - Immunosuppression (weakened immune system) including that caused by medications or by HIV;
 - Persons younger than 19 years of age who are receiving long-term aspirin therapy, because of an increased risk for Reye syndrome.

When should I see a medical provider right away?

If you become ill and experience any of the following warning signs, go to an emergency room or urgent care center.

For **children**, emergency warning signs that need urgent medical attention include:

- Fast breathing or trouble breathing
- Bluish or gray skin color (call 911 immediately)
- Not drinking enough fluids
- Severe or persistent vomiting
- Not waking up or not interacting
- Being so irritable that the child does not want to be held
- Flu-like symptoms improve but then return with fever and worse cough

For **adults**, emergency warning signs that need urgent medical attention include:

- Difficulty breathing or shortness of breath
- Pain or pressure in the chest or abdomen
- Sudden dizziness
- Confusion
- Severe or persistent vomiting
- Flu-like symptoms improve but then return with fever and worse cough

More information:

CDC: <http://www.cdc.gov/h1n1flu/>

State of Illinois: <http://www.ready.illinois.gov>