Plain Talk About the H1N1 Flu Pandemic

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It’s true we are in the midst of a major H1N1 flu pandemic that has infected several million people worldwide. It’s caused by a new virus for which people have little or no immunity. But, it’s also true the vast majority of infected individuals experience only mild to moderate symptoms. Most recover without requiring any medical treatment.

Unfortunately, there is a perception in many communities that the H1N1 flu could turn out to be a deadly disease. Many people have expressed concern and are frightened. There are two possible reasons for this.

One, people think the letters H and N indicate an illness similar in seriousness to the avian flu, which is caused by H5N1 virus. This is not true; H1N1 and H5N1 are two different viruses, which cause two different types of illnesses. H1N1 is much milder than the more serious H5N1.

Two, use of the word pandemic might connote seriousness. Not long ago, I asked a few people what they understood by the word ‘pandemic.’ Their responses were surprising. They said they thought it meant ‘plague-like illness,’ ‘deadly disease,’ ‘disease that spreads and kills,’ and so on. These words do not correctly characterize the current state of H1N1 and the way it presents itself. Pandemic illnesses are not always severe and fatal. Some are and others are not.

Symptoms of H1N1

So what do we know about H1N1 disease? It is a flu-like illness caused by the H1N1 virus. It is not the same as the common cold or stomach flu. Even though some people call it swine flu, it is not spread by or related to pigs or pork. Nor is it spread by food or by water that has been treated by conventional disinfection methods. The symptoms are similar to those of regular seasonal flu. They include: fever, cough, sneezing, sore throat, headache, body aches and so on. On occasions, patients may experience vomiting and or diarrhea. Hospitalizations and deaths have been reported. But they are rare. Most people develop mild to moderate symptoms and recover without requiring any medical treatment. There are effective medications available to treat the disease.

Like regular flu, the H1N1 flu is spread through coughing and sneezing by people who suffer from the illness. People who touch objects with the virus on them and then touch their nose or mouth can infect themselves. Like regular flu, H1N1 flu is contagious from the day before symptoms appear to five to seven days after.

So how does H1N1 differ from regular flu.

- H1N1 is more common in younger populations aged 50 years and less. Regular flu is more common in those 65 and older.
- Unlike regular flu, currently people have no or little immunity against H1N1 infection. That is why H1N1 continues to spread rapidly.
- There are separate vaccines for the two diseases.
So how can you protect yourself? Take simple everyday precautions such as using a tissue to cover your nose and mouth while coughing or sneezing and washing your hands frequently with soap and water. (See the box below for steps to protect yourself.)

About the H1N1 Vaccine

Now about the H1N1 vaccine. Based on what we know, H1N1 vaccine, like the regular flu vaccine, is expected to be very effective in preventing H1N1 flu. Reportedly, the vaccine will become available soon. In a recent press release, the World Health Organization (September 24, 2009) reported that “regulatory authorities have licensed pandemic vaccines in Australia, China, Hungary and the United States of America, soon to be followed by Japan and several countries in Europe.”

The US Centers for Disease Control and Prevention recommends the 2009 H1N1 influenza vaccine for the following groups: a) pregnant women; b) household contacts and caregivers for children younger than six months; c) healthcare and emergency medical services personnel; d) all people from six months through 24 years of age; and e) persons aged 25 through 64 years who suffer from chronic conditions such as asthma, heart problems, and diabetes. People ages 65 and above should be considered depending upon the availability of vaccines. I should mention that the regular flu vaccine, which is available every year, is not expected to protect against H1N1.

What about the safety of H1N1 vaccine? Based on the data available from clinical trials completed thus far, it is felt that side effects from the H1N1 vaccine are likely to be similar to those observed with regular seasonal flu vaccines. Examples of these include some soreness, swelling and redness at the site of the injection and possibly fever, headache, muscle or joint aches. It should be stressed that these symptoms are mild, self-limited and last one to two days. One other point: H1N1 and seasonal flu vaccines can be administered at the same time but at different sites, for example in opposite arms.

Effectiveness of Face Masks

I am often asked about the use of face masks and their effectiveness. What are the recommendations for their use? Their effectiveness in reducing transmission of the illness has not been established in open-air community settings and they are not recommended for healthy people in community or home settings. People with risk factors, such as children less than five years or people with chronic conditions such as asthma and heart conditions may benefit from the use of face masks. And if they are used, face masks should be combined with other, perhaps more effective measures. (See the box below for steps to protect yourself.)

The H1N1 pandemic is here to stay for a while. It continues to spread. On a positive note, most people who develop the disease experience mild to moderate symptoms and get better without any medical treatment. Furthermore, you can protect yourself with simple preventive measures such as hand washing and using a tissue to cover your nose and mouth while sneezing. These are effective methods for reducing the spread of disease. The vaccine will become available soon and it is expected to provide adequate immunity against the disease.

So, don’t panic. Take care of yourself by following simple preventive measures. Seek medical care when you need it. Keep yourself updated and stay well.

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