

A Parent's Guide to the Flu – Q & A with Le Bonheur Children's

Flu season has started early in the Mid-South this year, so Le Bonheur Children's is implementing a proactive plan to anticipate and manage patients with influenza infections this year.

To help inform our community about the flu, our Infectious Disease experts have compiled a series of questions and answers to provide you with important information.

Visits to the Emergency Department reached a high this week. Dr. Keith English, director of Infectious Diseases, recommends that parents contact their child's pediatrician before seeking medical care. Pediatricians will be able to best direct the parent to appropriate medical facility, whether it is the pediatrician's office, a Le Bonheur Urgent Care or the Emergency Department.

Below Dr. English and the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention answer common questions about the flu.

What is the flu?

There are two different types of influenza (flu) that will affect children this fall – the seasonal flu and the H1N1 flu.

Flu season usually runs from late fall through mid-winter, but this year is different. A novel H1N1 flu virus has been circulating in this area (and around the rest of the country) since early May. Illnesses caused by this virus are very similar to those caused by the usual fall-and-winter "seasonal flu".

Since it was first identified in two children in California in April 2009, the novel swine-origin H1N1 influenza A virus previously identified in Mexico has continued to circulate in Memphis, other areas of Tennessee and other parts of the United States.

In the Memphis area, the number of children (and adults) who have gone to physicians' offices and hospital emergency departments with flu-like illnesses has increased over the past several weeks. When tested at Le Bonheur, the majority of these patients have had confirmed infections with influenza A virus and it is likely that most or all of them were infected with the H1N1 virus.

The flu is a contagious respiratory illness caused by influenza viruses. The seasonal flu typically runs from late fall through mid-winter and symptoms usually hit hard and fast. Once symptoms occur, they typically last anywhere from three to seven days.

Is there a vaccine available?

Flu vaccine is an important way to reduce your child's risk of developing influenza, and this year there will be two different flu vaccines. The usual vaccine (for "seasonal influenza") will be available during the next few weeks and is recommended for children age 6 months and older AND all household contacts of infants younger than 6 months of age. The new vaccine (against the novel H1N1 flu virus) is expected to become available in mid-October and also will be recommended for children aged 6 months and older (and household contacts of infants younger than 6 months of age)

How can you prevent the flu?

Children should be educated about the importance of hand hygiene and respiratory etiquette. These common-sense actions can help reduce the spread of influenza and many other infectious agents.

- Cover your nose and mouth with a tissue when you cough or sneeze.
- If you don't have a tissue, cough or sneeze into your upper sleeve, not your hands.
- Throw the tissue in the trash after you use it.
- Wash your hands often with soap and water, especially after you cough or sneeze. Alcohol-based hand cleaners are also effective.
- Avoid touching your eyes, nose and mouth.
- Try to avoid close contact with sick people.
- If you get sick, stay home from work or school, and limit your contact with others to keep from infecting them. People should stay home at least 24 hours after they are free of fever (100°F), or signs of a fever without the use of fever-reducing medications.
- Visit the CDC website (<http://www.cdc.gov/h1n1flu/>) to find out what to do if you get sick with the flu and how to care for someone at home who is sick with the flu.

What are the flu symptoms?

Both the H1N1 and seasonal flu have similar symptoms. These symptoms include:

- Fever (usually high)
- Headache
- Extreme tiredness
- Dry cough
- Sore throat
- Runny or stuffy nose
- Muscle aches
- Lack of appetite
- Coughing
- Stomach symptoms, such as nausea, vomiting, and diarrhea, also can occur but are more common in children than adults

When do I need to seek medical care for my child?

Parents should use the same judgment and common sense they would have used last flu season to decide to seek treatment for their children. If you suspect your child has influenza, call your pediatrician. Le Bonheur agrees with the Tennessee Department of Health that, "in the majority of cases, testing is unnecessary" and that "initiation of treatment should be based on clinical presentation and should not be delayed for a confirmatory test".

There are several anti-viral medications that can be prescribed by your doctor, but these medications are most effective when given early in the course of illness. The criteria for prescribing antiviral therapy for

children with suspected or confirmed infection caused by the novel H1N1 influenza A virus are essentially the same as those that should be used for the treatment of seasonal influenza. Treatment is recommended for patients with severe symptoms and for patients at high-risk* for complications of the flu (this includes children less than 5 years of age and especially those less than 2 years of age and children with chronic underlying medical conditions)

*(from the CDC website) “*Children at “high-risk” of developing complications of influenza include the following: “(children less than 5 years of age – especially those less than 2 years of age; children with chronic pulmonary (including asthma), cardiovascular (except hypertension), renal, hepatic, cognitive, neurologic/neuromuscular, hematological or metabolic disorders (including diabetes mellitus); children who are immunosuppressed (including immunosuppression caused by medications or by HIV infection); children receiving long-term aspirin therapy who might be at risk for experiencing Reye syndrome after influenza virus infection; residents of long-term care facilities; and pregnant patients).”

According to the CDC, illness with the new H1N1 virus has ranged from mild to severe. While most people who have been sick have recovered without needing medical treatment, hospitalizations and deaths from infection with this virus have occurred.

To relieve your child's pain and symptoms, first, administer fluids and make sure your child is getting plenty of rest. Acetaminophen helps with the aches, pains and fever reduction.

How does novel H1N1 flu compare to seasonal flu in terms of its severity and infection rates? According to the CDC: “With seasonal flu, we know that seasons vary in terms of timing, duration and severity”. Seasonal influenza can cause mild to severe illness, and at times can lead to death. Each year, in the United States, on average 36,000 people die from flu-related complications and more than 200,000 people are hospitalized from flu-related causes. Of those hospitalized, 20,000 are children younger than 5 years old. Over 90% of deaths and about 60 percent of hospitalization occur in people older than 65.

When the novel H1N1 outbreak was first detected in mid-April 2009, the CDC began working with states to collect, compile and analyze information regarding the novel H1N1 flu outbreak, including the numbers of confirmed and probable cases and the ages of these people. The information analyzed by the CDC supports the conclusion that H1N1 flu has caused greater disease burden in people younger than 25 years of age than older people. At this time, there are few cases and few deaths reported in people older than 64 years old, which is unusual when compared with seasonal flu. However, pregnancy and other previously recognized high risk medical conditions from seasonal influenza appear to be associated with increased risk of complications from this novel H1N1. These underlying conditions include asthma, diabetes, suppressed immune systems, heart disease, kidney disease, neurocognitive and neuromuscular disorders and pregnancy.”

What is Le Bonheur Children's doing about the flu?

We recommend that all health care workers be vaccinated against both the seasonal and the H1N1 influenza viruses. We will begin administering the seasonal flu vaccine in September, and plan to administer the H1N1 vaccine when it becomes available.

In addition, we will be providing the vaccine to eligible patients and their family members. Our medical staff recommends that the following inpatients be immunized:

1. All children aged 6 months--2 years
2. Children with chronic pulmonary (including asthma), cardiovascular (except hypertension), renal, hepatic, cognitive, neurologic/neuro-muscular, hematological or metabolic disorders (including diabetes mellitus);
3. Children who are immunosuppressed (including immunosuppression caused by medications or by HIV infection);
4. Children receiving long-term aspirin therapy who might be at risk for experiencing Reye syndrome after influenza virus infection;
5. Residents of long-term care facilities; and
6. Patients who will be pregnant during the influenza season.

We will also be offering the vaccine to all parents/primary caregivers of our high-risk inpatients, including parents of children less than 2 years of age, parents of children in the high-risk categories listed above and parents of patients hospitalized in our ICU, TCU, CV-ICU, NICU or Infant Care Units.

Also, at Le Bonheur we take hand hygiene very seriously. The hospital has an extremely high compliance rate for hand washing – 95 percent. We ask that our health care workers wash hands before entering a patient's room and after contact. Alcohol hand sanitizers are placed throughout hospital in convenient locations for patients, families, visitors and health care workers. Each year, the hospital uses about 6,000 bottles of hand sanitizer. We also participate in a city-wide campaign – Come Clean – to encourage hand hygiene for good health.

For more information:

Center for Disease Control and Prevention - <http://www.cdc.gov/h1n1flu/qa.htm>

Memphis and Shelby County Health Department -

http://www.shelbycountyttn.gov/FirstPortal/dotShowDoc//dotContent/Spotlight/swine_hotline.html

