wants you to stay healthy

What you should know about seasonal and H1N1 ("swine") flu

When flu season comes around, it's important to know the facts. Here is some information for Blue Shield members about two different vaccines, and who will get early priority for the H1N1 vaccine, followed by information about flu symptoms and treatment.

Why two vaccines?

Influenza (the flu) is a contagious respiratory illness caused by influenza viruses. Flu viruses change all the time, and vaccination is the best protection against getting the flu. That’s why you need to have a new flu shot every year – to protect against the flu strains that are most likely to be around this year. This season, there are two flu vaccines: seasonal flu and the new 2009 H1N1 (swine) flu vaccine.

Every year the flu shot is updated to include the most current flu virus strains. At the time that this year’s seasonal flu vaccine was put into production, the H1N1 influenza virus had not become a significant threat, so this year’s seasonal flu shot does not include protection against the H1N1 strain. Once it became apparent that the H1N1 flu was spreading in this country, the government ordered the production of a second vaccine to specifically protect against the H1N1 influenza.

H1N1 priority groups

While the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) is encouraging people to get vaccinated for both H1N1 and seasonal flu, the H1N1 vaccine will initially be in short supply. Therefore, the CDC has asked that the following priority groups be the first to receive the H1N1 flu vaccine:

• Pregnant women
• Healthcare workers and emergency medical responders
• People living with or caring for infants under 6 months of age
• Children and young adults from 6 months to 24 years of age
• People ages 25 to 64 years with underlying health conditions (e.g., asthma, diabetes) or compromised immune systems
If the H1N1 vaccine supply is not initially sufficient to meet the demand of all the target groups, the CDC further recommends that the following sub-groups be given first priority until vaccine supplies increase:

- Pregnant women
- Healthcare workers and emergency medical responders
- People living with or caring for infants under 6 months of age
- Children ages 6 months through 4 years
- Children and adolescents ages 5 through 18 years who have health conditions that put them at higher risk for influenza-related complications

Once the demand for vaccine has been met by these priority groups, other adults are encouraged to receive a vaccine.

What are the symptoms?
Symptoms are similar for H1N1 and seasonal flu. They include fever, cough, sore throat, runny or stuffy nose, body aches, headache, chills, and fatigue. Some people also have diarrhea and vomiting. If you experience these symptoms, stay home and avoid contact with others as much as possible, including avoiding travel and not going to work or school, for at least 24 hours after your fever is gone, except to get medical care or for other necessities.

What are the treatments?
Most people will recover from seasonal flu and H1N1 without needing medical care, but those with serious illness or those at risk for complications from flu (pregnant women, young children, people with chronic conditions, and people over age 65) should see a healthcare provider if they experience flu-like symptoms.

If you become infected with influenza, your doctor may prescribe antiviral medications. Treatment with antiviral medications is generally not needed for people who are not at higher risk for complications or who do not have severe influenza illness. Your doctor will decide whether antiviral treatment is right for you. If treatment is prescribed by your doctor, antiviral medication should be started within two days after becoming sick to reduce the severity of flu symptoms and shorten the time you are sick by one or two days.

Get vaccinated
Getting the flu vaccine each year is the first and most important step in protecting against flu. Talk to your doctor about receiving the H1N1 vaccine in addition to the seasonal flu vaccine.

If you have questions about your vaccine benefits, call the Customer Service number on your Blue Shield member ID card.

Everyone can take steps now to keep healthy. Go to www.flu.gov for flu prevention checklists, as well as the most up-to-date information about seasonal and H1N1 flu.