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Update on the 2009 H1N1 influenza A virus in Kansas

The annual seasonal flu vaccine is coming early this year, and the Kansas Department of Health and Environment (KDHE) says it's a good idea to get it soon, before the expected rush for the new pandemic H1N1 flu vaccine.

The pandemic vaccine, which is still under development, is likely to keep local health departments, clinics and retail vaccinators busier than ever once it arrives in Kansas by October. The seasonal flu vaccine, usually given in the fall, is already coming into Kansas and will soon be available in large quantities.

"The seasonal flu vaccination will not provide protection against H1N1," stated Dr. Jason Eberhart-Phillips, State Health Officer and Director of the Division of Health at the Kansas Department of Health and Environment (KDHE). "Separate vaccinations will be needed in order to be fully protected this flu season."

Vaccination against seasonal flu can begin as soon as vaccine is available later this month or in September. The goal for individuals – especially those at high risk of developing complications from influenza, according to Dr. Eberhart-Phillips – is to receive a seasonal flu vaccination before influenza activity is taking place in the community.

"The sooner that people receive their seasonal flu vaccination, the better," he said. "Regardless of how early individuals receive the vaccination, they will have protection from seasonal flu throughout the season."

At this time, clinical trials for H1N1 vaccine are underway, with plans for the vaccine to be available in Kansas sometime in October or possibly sooner.

If approved, the H1N1 vaccine will initially be made available to individuals in certain groups, as determined by the Center for Disease Control and Prevention's Advisory Committee on Immunization Practices. These groups have been identified as having the highest risk of having severe illness with the H1N1 virus. Depending upon the initial availability of the vaccine, further prioritization may have to be done within these initial groups. The groups identified in the guidance are as follows:

- Pregnant women.
- Household contacts and caregivers of infants younger than 6 months of age
- All children and young adults ages 6 months through 24 years

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- Healthcare personnel
- People aged 25-64 years with high-risk medical conditions

“The amount of H1N1 vaccine that will be available at first is not currently known. Even if you are considered at high risk, it could take some time before you are able to be vaccinated,” said Dr. Eberhart-Phillips.

He further explained that the seasonal vaccine will probably be available earlier than the H1N1 vaccine. The vaccination to protect against H1N1 flu, if approved, could require two shots to be administered, possibly at least 21 days apart. The seasonal flu vaccine could therefore be administered during the same visit that someone receives a dose of the vaccine for H1N1, if that becomes necessary.

KDHE is currently working to identify private health care providers who can assist local health departments with administering H1N1 vaccine to patients.

Cases of H1N1 flu have now been confirmed in 49 Kansas counties. As is typically the case with almost any infectious disease, it is generally believed that unreported cases of H1N1 are also occurring elsewhere in the state.

The symptoms of infection with the pandemic H1N1 virus are similar to the symptoms of seasonal flu and include fever greater than 100 degrees, body aches, coughing, sore throat, respiratory congestion, and in some cases, diarrhea and vomiting.

Individuals who experience the above symptoms should contact their health care provider, who will determine whether testing or treatment is needed. There is no vaccine available yet to protect against the pandemic H1N1 virus, but there are treatments that can shorten the course of illness in severe cases, once the infection is diagnosed.

As with any influenza virus, individuals are encouraged to take the following steps to reduce spread:

- Wash your hands thoroughly with soap and warm water or use an alcohol-based hand sanitizer to get rid of most germs and avoid touching your eyes, nose and mouth.
- Stay home when you are sick to avoid spreading illness to co-workers and friends.
- Cough or sneeze into your elbow or a tissue and properly dispose of used tissues.
- Stay healthy by eating a balanced diet, drinking plenty of water and getting adequate rest and exercise.

KDHE has established a phone number for concerned Kansans to call with questions about the 2009 H1N1 influenza A virus. The toll-free number is **1-877-427-7317**. Operators will be available to answer questions from **8 a.m. – 5 p.m. Monday through Friday**. Persons calling will be directed to press “1” on their touch-tone phone to be directed to an operator who can answer questions.

Kansans with questions about the virus can email H1N1fluinfo@kdheks.gov. Information is also available from KDHE at www.kdheks.gov.

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Through education, direct services and the assessment of data and trends, coupled with policy development and enforcement, KDHE will improve health and quality of life. We prevent illness, injuries and foster a safe and sustainable environment for the people of Kansas.