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Contact: Christine Decker Stone, 971-673-1282 (desk), 503-602-8027 (cell);

Christine.l.stone@state.or.us

H1N1: Tips for when to seek medical advice

Caring for yourself and others with the flu: You probably don't need to see a doctor

As more people experience flu-like symptoms that could be pandemic H1N1 influenza, Oregon Public Health officials are reminding people of what they can do to protect themselves and others.

“So far, the H1N1 flu is not more serious than regular flu, so if you are sick, stay home to avoid spreading it to others and take good care of yourself,” says Dr. Mel Kohn, Oregon Public Health director. “If you have other conditions that put you at high risk or if symptoms get serious, that’s when you should call your doctor.” (See list of conditions below.)*

Public health officials are asking people to take the guidelines seriously about staying home, says Kohn.

“The issue with this flu is not that it’s more dangerous,” says Kohn. “It’s that few of us have immunity until we get vaccinated. That means high absenteeism in our schools and businesses unless we all take this seriously and do everything we can to stop the spread.”

Kohn reminds people that staying at home when sick means not leaving your residence except to seek medical care in the rare cases that it is necessary. Ill people should avoid normal activities including work, school, travel, shopping, and social and public gatherings. They should stay home for at least 24 hours after fever (over 100 degrees) subsides. While at home, they should get plenty of rest, drink plenty of liquids, cover coughs and sneezes, and watch for warning signs that might indicate the need for medical attention.

Most people will recover completely on their own after a week or so of illness and don't need to see a doctor.

*Some health conditions increase the risk of severe illness from influenza:

- Pregnancy;
- Long-term aspirin therapy in children and adolescents (aged 6 mos.--18 yrs.);
- Chronic lung (including asthma), heart, kidney, liver, blood, or metabolic disorders (including diabetes);
- Immuno-suppression (including that caused by medications or HIV);
- Any condition (e.g., cognitive dysfunction, spinal cord injuries, seizures, or neuromuscular disorders) that affects respiratory function or handling of respiratory secretions or that increases the risk for aspiration; and
- Residence in a nursing home or other chronic-care facility.

Also, children aged 6- 59 months (up to 5 years) and adults aged 65 years and older are considered at increased risk for severe illness from influenza.

People who have severe illness or are at high risk for flu complications should contact a health care provider who will determine whether treatment is needed. If you are directed to see a health care provider, ask if the facility has any special procedures for flu sufferers who visit.

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

- Fast breathing or trouble breathing
- Bluish or gray skin color
- Not drinking enough fluids
- Severe or persistent vomiting
- Not waking up or not interacting
- So irritable that the child does not want to be held
- Flu-like symptoms improve but then return with fever and worse cough
- Fever with a rash

In 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 cough

People with severe symptoms should call 911 or go to the nearest emergency department.

The Oregon Public Health Department has also provided the following guidelines for people who must care for someone else with H1N1 influenza: Check with that person's health care provider about any special care they may need for certain health conditions such as pregnancy, diabetes, heart disease, asthma or emphysema—and to determine if the ill person should take antiviral medication. Antiviral medications can lessen flu like symptoms and can be helpful for people at high risk but they are not recommended for the general public.

Treat the flu sufferer with over-the-counter pain and fever relievers such as acetaminophen or ibuprofen, but never give aspirin to children or teenagers, which can cause a serious illness called Reye's Syndrome. Do not give children younger than 4 years of age over-the-counter cold medications without first checking with your health care provider.

Avoid being face-to-face with the sick person and try to provide good ventilation. Wash hands after touching the sick person and keep surfaces clean. Keep the ill person at home but away from others in the house as much as possible, as least until fever (over 100 degrees) is absent for 24 hours. Make sure the sick person drinks plenty of liquids.

Public health officials do not recommend the use of masks in the community to prevent exposure to H1N1 influenza.

Vaccination is the best way to prevent against H1N1 as well as the seasonal flu. In addition, public health experts continue to advise the public to take basic precautions to help slow the spread of all influenza:

- Wash your hands
- Cover your cough
- Stay home if you are sick

For more information, please visit the Oregon Department of Human Services Web site www.flu.oregon.gov or call the Oregon Public Health Flu Hotline: 800-978-3040