



ElderCare Q&A

Swine Flu & Seniors

Q: Are older people more susceptible to the Swine Flu?

A: No. According to the U.S. Centers for Disease Control (CDC) current studies indicate the risk for infection from swine flu among persons age 65 or older is less than the risk for younger age groups.

Swine flu is a virus infection which can cause a wide range of symptoms, including fever, cough, sore throat, body aches, headache, chills and fatigue. Some people have reported diarrhea and vomiting. Like seasonal flu, swine flu can vary from mild to severe. Severe disease with pneumonia, respiratory failure and even death is possible with swine flu infection.

Certain groups may be more likely to develop a severe illness from swine flu, such as pregnant women and people with chronic medical conditions. Flu viruses generally spread when droplets from a cough or sneeze of an infected person are propelled through the air and land on the mouth or nose of people nearby. Flu viruses can also spread when a person touches respiratory droplets on another person or an object and then touches their own mouth or nose (or someone else's mouth or nose) before washing their hands.

The CDC has special guidance for people with heart and cardiovascular disease:

- Maintain a two week supply of your medications.
- Don't stop taking your medications without talking with your health care provider, especially in the event of influenza or a respiratory infection.
- People with heart failure should be alert to changes in their breathing and should promptly report changes to their health care provider.
- Wash your hands often with soap and water and follow other basic hygiene to avoid infection.

For people with diabetes, being sick by itself can raise your blood glucose. Illness can prevent you from eating properly, which further affects blood glucose. Diabetes can make your immune system more vulnerable to severe cases of the flu. People with diabetes who come down with the flu may become very sick and may even have to go to a hospital. Everyone with diabetes should get a yearly seasonal flu shot. The best time to get one is between October and mid-November.

Because seniors are not considered in the highest risk group for swine flu, the CDC has recommended that the people who should be vaccinated first are: pregnant women; people who live with or care for children younger than 6 months of age; health care and emergency medical services personnel; persons between the ages of 6 months through 24 years of age; and people from ages 25 through 64 years who are at higher risk for swine flu because of chronic health disorders or compromised immune systems.

The CDC says it doesn't expect there will be a shortage of swine flu vaccine. But because supply and demand is unpredictable, the CDC suggests that as demand for vaccine among younger age groups is being met, providers should offer vaccination to people over the age of 65. It is important for seniors to remember that even if you are vaccinated for swine flu, you should also get the seasonal vaccine as soon as it is available. The swine flu vaccine does not replace the seasonal flu vaccine. Both vaccines are supposed to be used to protect people, and both vaccines can be taken on the same day.

According to the Massachusetts Department of Public Health, the Commonwealth may see its supply of seasonal influenza vaccine earlier than ever. Health care providers across the state could start vaccinating their patients for seasonal flu as early as the end of August. A vaccine for seasonal flu won't protect you from the new swine flu, but a swine flu vaccine may be available in large quantities starting in October.

Seniors are urged to get vaccinated against seasonal influenza as soon as vaccines become available at your doctor's office or other health center, and ask your doctor when swine flu vaccine will be ready. To speak with a CDC representative about swine flu, call 1-800-CDC-INFO.