

## INFLUENZA UPDATE FOR 2009-2010

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The influenza season this year will be unique in that two outbreaks will occur. The first has largely passed and was due to a new strain known as H1N1, or “swine flu”. The second has yet to arrive and consists of A and B strains known as “seasonal” influenza. In Montana, the seasonal influenza has been late in the winter the last 2 years with most cases in March and April. However, every year is different and cases could start as early as January.

Influenza is a viral infection that is predominately respiratory in nature. Symptoms will vary significantly from person to person, but usually include sore throat, fever, body aches, cough and congestion. The most worrisome complication is pneumonia, but ear and sinus infections may also result. Medical treatment is directed towards preventing complications in high risk patients, especially infants and the elderly. Treatment is mostly supportive in healthy children and adults, though anti-viral medications such as Tamiflu and Relenza may be helpful. Anti-viral medications only slow the progression of the virus, but may shorten the illness and prevent complications. In the case of the H1N1 virus, anti-viral medications did not have a dramatic effect, only shortening the illness by one day. Fortunately H1N1 did not have the virulence that was initially expected and tended to be no worse than a typical seasonal strain. Few people had immunity to the novel strain and it was very contagious and widespread. Though more deaths in children have been reported nationwide, it may reflect a higher prevalence of the disease. In other words, since so many children were sick with H1N1, the total number deaths were higher. Vaccine arrived only after the virus was widespread and was limited to high risk groups. However, the vaccine is now widely available and I encourage anyone who has not had it to get vaccinated. Initially, it did not appear there would be enough vaccine for children to receive two doses. It is now recommended that children under 10 years receive a second dose, especially if in a high risk group.

Seasonal flu vaccine was in short supply this year, but a small supply has recently become available. I would encourage anyone who has not had the “regular” flu shot to get one soon. Seasonal flu targets the three most anticipated strains for the season and though not 100% certain to prevent the disease, always offers some degree of protection.

Influenza is a miserable and sometimes lethal disease. We were fortunate that the H1N1 pandemic was not the dreaded lethal strain that it first appeared to be. It did demonstrate that nothing could slow the spread of the virus as it made its way from Mexico to infect the majority of children in Belgrade.

Prevention in the form of flu shots remains the best medicine, and there is still time to get vaccinated before the “seasonal” flu hits later this winter.

For further information go to [www.cdc.gov](http://www.cdc.gov).