



MASSACHUSETTS

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## News Release

Public Relations  
Landmark Center  
401 Park Drive  
Boston, MA 02215-3326

**CONTACT:** Tara Murray  
(617) 246-4851  
Tara.Murray@bcbsma.com

### **Flu Season Preparation Comes Early**

*Blue Cross Blue Shield of Massachusetts offers information about preparing now for the upcoming flu season*

**Boston, MA – August 31, 2009** – The emergence of the new H1N1 (swine) flu puts increased emphasis on preparing early for the upcoming flu season. The seasonal flu vaccine will be available earlier this year, and people are urged to get their flu shot as soon as possible. Since both the seasonal flu and the new H1N1 (swine) flu can cause severe illness, hospitalizations, and even death, it is important to know if you are recommended to receive either or both flu vaccinations, understand prevention techniques, identify symptoms, and learn how to treat yourself if you do become sick. [Blue Cross Blue Shield of Massachusetts](#)' (BCBSMA) Prevention and Wellness Program offers the following tips and facts about the upcoming flu season.

#### **Get Vaccinated**

Vaccines play an important role in the effort to fight influenza. This year, in addition to the seasonal flu vaccine, the U.S. government is taking steps to manufacture a novel H1N1 (swine) flu vaccine. While the seasonal flu vaccine is expected to begin to be available in late August, the H1N1 (swine) flu vaccine is should be available sometime in October.

“The seasonal flu shot will be available earlier than usual this year in order to make time for health workers to administer H1N1 vaccinations sometime in October. Everyone should get the seasonal flu shot as soon as possible, especially people who are considered high-risk for complications,” explains Dr. Tom Hawkins, a Medical Director at BCBSMA.

It is estimated about ninety percent of Massachusetts' population will fall into the risk category recommended for seasonal flu vaccinations, while about half will fall into that category for the H1N1 (swine) flu vaccination (*Boston Globe*, “State Takes Extra Steps to Battle Flu in the Fall,” August 13, 2009).

To find out if you are recommended to get either flu shot, check the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) web site for details on both flu strains at:

H1N1 (Swine) Flu: <http://www.cdc.gov/h1n1flu>

Seasonal Flu: [www.cdc.gov/flu](http://www.cdc.gov/flu)

People who are considered high-risk in Massachusetts can also call the Department of Public Health's (DPH) flu vaccine hotline toll free at (866) 627-7968 to obtain information about where and when they may receive a flu shot in their community.

### **Two Vaccines, One Set of Symptoms**

The symptoms of the seasonal flu and the H1N1 (swine) flu are similar and include fever, cough, sore throat, body aches, headache, chills, and fatigue. Some people have reported diarrhea and vomiting.

Because the symptoms are similar, the treatment is similar as well.

“In many cases, your health care provider will advise lots of rest and fluids. Call your doctor if you have any concerns. If you find yourself experiencing severe symptoms, such as difficulty breathing or uncontrollable vomiting, seek medical attention right away,” added Dr. Hawkins.

### **Treating Yourself at Home and Protecting Others**

People with any of these symptoms can take a number of steps to get healthy and protect others from illness, including:

- Drink hot liquids to rehydrate, soothe a sore throat, and unplug a stuffy nose.
- Don't suppress coughs that bring up mucus.
- Don't consume dairy products for several days. These products make it hard for some people to cough up mucus.
- Take acetaminophen, ibuprofen, or naproxen sodium. Children and teenagers should stay away from aspirin. As always, people should check with their health care provider to make sure that these treatments are appropriate.
- Always cover your mouth and nose with a tissue when coughing or sneezing to prevent those around you from getting sick. If a tissue isn't available, use the crook of your arm – NOT your hand.
- Stay home from work or school, and do not run errands.
- Ask for a mask when in the doctor's office or hospital.
- Get some rest!

“Before returning to work or other activities, people should make sure they are fever-free for at least 24 hours,” recommends Dr. Hawkins.

Antiviral drugs, prescribed by a physician, can shorten the time that people are sick by one to two days and help to prevent serious flu complications. Because supplies are limited and can cause certain flu strains to become resistant, antiviral drugs are usually prescribed only to those who have severe flu-like symptoms, are considered high-risk for complications, or are allergic to the vaccination.

It is important to note that antiviral drugs are not a substitute for vaccinations, and they work best if started within two days of symptoms. Speak to your doctor if you have questions about whether you or your family members need antiviral medication.

## **Prevention**

There are everyday actions that can help prevent the spread of germs that cause respiratory illnesses like influenza. Whether it's the seasonal flu, common cold, or H1N1 (swine) flu, the best thing to do to stay healthy is practice good hygiene, including:

- Frequently wash your hands with soap and water. When hand washing is not possible, use antiseptic hand gels that contain alcohol.
- Cover your mouth and nose with a tissue when coughing or sneezing. Throw out the tissue in the nearest wastebasket and then immediately wash hands with soap and water.
- Stay at least three feet away from people who are coughing or sneezing.
- After contact with someone who is ill, immediately wash your hands.
- Keep sick children at home, and teach them good hygiene habits.

For more information on preventing and treating the seasonal flu and H1N1 (swine) flu, visit <http://www.cdc.gov/>. Massachusetts residents looking for up-to-date flu information should call the Massachusetts Department of Public Health, toll free, at 866-627-7968 or visit [www.mass.gov/dph/flu](http://www.mass.gov/dph/flu).

BCBSMA's Prevention and Wellness Program started in January 1995 and provides initiatives to promote preventive health to BCBSMA's three million members. For more information about Blue Cross Blue Shield of Massachusetts's Prevention and Wellness Program, call 1-800-262-BLUE.

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