

## **Poki Namkung: The flu is nothing to sneeze at**

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Poki Namkung

"It's just the flu." Maybe you've heard this from a feverish, sniffing colleague, or uttered these words yourself. For most people, the flu involves a few miserable days of symptoms and time away from school or work. But for about 36,000 people in the United States each year, flu is lethal, particularly among the very young and the very old. Another 200,000 develop flu-related complications such as pneumonia serious enough to require hospitalizations. Forgive the pun, but the flu short for influenza is nothing to sneeze at. The good news, though, is that it's largely preventable with a regular annual flu shot, now recommended for most children and adults.

This fall and winter, in addition to the regular seasonal flu strains, we're likely to experience another visitor from the flu family: Pandemic H1N1 2009, or what was first known as swine flu. It is now making its way through the Southern Hemisphere as that part of the world experiences its fall and winter seasons. Pandemic flu is still a factor in the United States, where it was first detected in March 2009 and spread quickly to all 50 states and 134 countries around the world.

So far, pandemic H1N1 flu appears to be transmitted in ways similar to regular seasonal flu -- through exposure to the coughs and sneezes of those infected with it. Unlike seasonal flu, though, it appears to be deadlier in younger people.

Scientists and vaccine manufacturers are working hard to manufacture a safe vaccine that would protect people against pandemic H1N1 flu. Eventually, everyone will be able to receive the vaccine. But because this flu affects younger populations more than seasonal flu does, the first to receive the pandemic flu vaccine may be all children between 6 months and 18 years of age and professionals who work with them e.g., teachers and child care staff. In a best-case scenario, the pandemic H1N1 strain will remain relatively mild and vaccine will be plentiful. If the virus mutates as often happens with influenza and becomes more virulent or affects different groups, the strategy will have to change.

In Santa Cruz County, we have a good chance of achieving strong vaccine coverage for both seasonal and pandemic H1N1 influenza strains and preventing both types of flu. We have a public-private partnership in the Health Improvement Partnership HIP of Santa Cruz County, through which public health and private providers can work together to make sure the public is informed about both types of vaccines and where and how to get them.

Flu is preventable. Neither the seasonal nor the pandemic flu shot can give you the flu -- they are both inactivated dead virus vaccines and are the only sure way to not get the flu. Before flu season strikes later this year, protect yourself by getting a seasonal flu shot -- and make this a habit every year. If you have children or work with them, be prepared for additional vaccinations against the pandemic H1N1 flu strain as soon as it becomes available. Frequent hand washing; covering your nose and mouth when you cough and sneeze; keeping your hands away from your eyes, nose, and mouth; and staying home if you are sick are all additional preventive measures that can help keep you and others healthy against many bugs and viruses, including these.

Poki Namkung is Santa Cruz County's Health Officer and a board member of the Health Improvement Partnership.