

What is H1N1?

A Conversation With Joseph Gross, MD



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The eruption of a pandemic is a relatively rare event, occurring only a few times in any given century. The 2009 H1N1 influenza virus has been the focus of keen interest among the medical communities at the local, national and world levels. Joseph Gross, MD, has been following the virus since it emerged in April of this year. We talked with Dr. Gross to gain the latest, ground-level perspective on the H1N1 virus.

How serious a threat is H1N1?

It's a situation that should be taken seriously, to certainly take a lot of care with, but not to panic about. At this point, the disease caused by H1N1 in terms of severity of illness is and is similar to what we see from year to year.

The main difference with H1N1 so far is the fact that it's affecting young

people and causing influenza in younger people, and that it has showed up at a time of year that's unusual for influenza – in April – and continuing through much of the summer rather than being confined to the late winter months.

We hear a lot about this being a "novel" virus. What does this mean and why is it important?

H1N1 influenza virus is a genetically new type of virus. It's different from other types of influenza viruses that have circulated before. For that reason there are a larger number of different types of people who are susceptible to developing infection with H1N1 influenza.

Many of these are young people whose immune systems may not be as experienced with dealing with influenza as older people are.

It has the potential to cause more influenza infections than are seen in typical flu seasons. A unique feature about H1N1 influenza is that, because it is genetically different, it is somewhat unpredictable. It is an influenza virus, and is in many ways similar to previous viruses, but it is unpredictable and only

time will tell how this will develop. Influenzas change a certain degree from year to year, which is why there is a new flu shot available every season, because a new immunity is necessary. But the difference between H1N1 and previous influenza is greater than we usually see from one year to the next.

H1N1 is a new, or novel, influenza virus causing illness in people. This new virus was first detected in people in the United States in April 2009. This virus is spreading from person-to-person worldwide, probably in much the same way that regular seasonal influenza viruses spread.

On June 11th of the year, the World Health Organization announced that the H1N1 virus had become a pandemic. What is a pandemic?

A pandemic occurs when there is a very large percentage of the world's population that is at risk for acquiring a particular infection and therefore a very large number of people can become infected at the same time. That's what's happened with H1N1 influenza over the last few months, since it first appeared in Mexico earlier in 2009.

Pandemics are fairly rare occurrences?

They happen every few decades and this has been going on for centuries.

Many of the features of H1N1 are quite similar to what's happened in previous

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