

## MSHA Safety Talks: H1N1 Flu (Week of September 7, 2009)

Whether you're concerned as a parent, a grandparent, or just as yourself, what we hear about the H1N1 flu virus (or swine flu as it's also known) is a bit unnerving. It's become serious enough that every sniffle and every cough can make us wonder what's going on and if this is the onset of the illness.



### **How worried should we be?**

When this new strain of H1N1 influenza emerged last spring, public health experts were afraid it might be like the 1918 flu, the world's deadliest epidemic. That strain also showed up as a relatively mild spring virus but re-emerged in a more intense form in the fall.

The new strain of H1N1 is not following that pattern. While it has accounted for about 90 percent of the flu virus circulating in the Southern Hemisphere, the strain is behaving a lot like seasonal flu, Dr. Neil O. Fishman, an infectious-disease specialist at the University of Pennsylvania, told the New York Times.

"There is a sigh of relief that the virus hasn't mutated," Dr. Fishman said. "Fortunately, the swine flu that we're seeing still is a moderate disease that

is behaving very much like ordinary seasonal influenza."

That doesn't mean we should relax. Dr. Fishman went on to say the virus was unpredictable and could still mutate. So we still need to be careful: wash our hands and stay home if we develop symptoms.

And, too, don't think "ordinary" flu is a walk in the park. According to the Centers for Disease Control, about 200,000 people are hospitalized with severe flu symptoms each year and 36,000 die.

### **Are children at higher risk for swine flu?**

A big difference between swine flu and seasonal flu is that people over 60 appear to have some immunity to swine flu, while younger people seem not to. And because children and young adults are more likely to gather in groups—at school and colleges—they're more vulnerable to catching all types of flu. So, while the disease does not at the moment appear to be more severe than seasonal flu, a disproportionate number of young people will probably get it.

As with seasonal flu, some people will get very sick and some of them will die. Federal health officials report that at least 36 children in the United States have died of swine flu; most had nervous system disorders like cerebral palsy or developmental delays. Some, however, had been healthy; they died of bacterial infections that set in after the flu.