

Seasonal and Pandemic (Novel H1N1) Influenza: Killers Both
Presentation Summary
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Influenza is currently the leading cause of vaccine preventable death in the United States. Annually, seasonal influenza in the U.S. causes an estimated 36,000 deaths and 200,000 hospitalizations. Most of the deaths are in the elderly, but the hospitalization rate in children age 2 years or younger is the same as in the elderly. It is particularly tragic when a child dies, especially when a parent asks “could the vaccine have prevented this?” As of June 30, 2009, The Centers for Disease Control and Prevention had received 89 reports of influenza-associated pediatric deaths (67 seasonal and 22 pandemic). Between 2003 and 2009, the annual pediatric death rate has ranged from 46-153; most of these children were previously healthy. Also, 42% of these fatal seasonal influenza cases in 2007-2008 were co-infected with community-associated methicillin-resistant *Staphylococcus aureus* (CA MRSA), something not reported for the pandemic influenza deaths so far.

Unfortunately, seasonal influenza immunization has never been a health priority for Americans. Influenza illness is not easy to recognize and is often confused with other less severe respiratory viral infections, like the common cold. However, it is much more severe, with high fever, decreased activity, muscle aches, sore throat and fatigue that last for up to 10 days or more. But because influenza vaccine myths persist (it gave me the flu, I never get the flu and don’t need a vaccine, etc.), influenza vaccine uptake remains poor in children (30% of those under 5 years; 40% for healthcare workers).

The pandemic influenza expected for years finally arrived in April 2009. Fortunately, illness to date has been relatively mild in contrast to the 1918 pandemic that killed millions. Novel H1N1 has caused million of cases worldwide because of its ease of spread, and the age groups most affected are the young rather than the elderly. However, there is no protection from pandemic (novel H1N1) influenza from seasonal influenza vaccine, so we can expect millions of cases this fall and winter.

What can we do? First, we should have seasonal influenza vaccine soon, and we need to start vaccinating as soon as the vaccine is available. While vaccine is the best prevention method, remember hand hygiene, cough etiquette and social distancing also helps for both types of influenza. Second, stay at home or keep your child home if you or he/she is sick. Finally, make seasonal influenza vaccination a health priority like we did with polio.