What is H1N1 (swine) flu?
H1N1 flu (originally called “swine flu”) is an illness in people caused by a new flu virus. This new virus was first detected in people in the United States in April 2009. Other countries, including Mexico and Canada, have reported people sick with this new virus. This virus is spreading from person-to-person, probably in much the same way that regular seasonal influenza viruses spread.

How is H1N1 (swine) flu different than seasonal influenza?
This is a new flu virus that is very unusual. It has not been seen before in the US or elsewhere. It is too soon to predict what will happen or how the virus might change. Since it is new, people do not have immunity to it. That's why the global public health system is on alert. Public health officials are monitoring the flu carefully for changes that may occur. We are learning more about it every day. Since viruses are able to change frequently, there is some concern that this flu might come back next fall during the regular flu season and be more serious.

What are the signs and symptoms of H1N1 (swine) flu?
The symptoms of H1N1 flu are like the symptoms of regular flu:
- Fever
- Cough
- Sore throat
- Body aches and headache
- Chills
- Fatigue
- Diarrhea and vomiting (less common)

Like seasonal flu, H1N1 flu may worsen chronic medical conditions (such as diabetes, heart disease, and lung disease). Pregnant women appear to be at particular risk. So far, U.S. cases of H1N1 flu have generally been mild. However we do anticipate that there will be more cases and more hospitalizations and deaths in the coming days and weeks, because the population has little or no immunity to this new virus.

How can I tell if someone sitting next to me has H1N1 flu?
You can't. This virus is spreading from person-to-person without regard for borders, race, or ethnicity. If someone has the H1N1 symptoms (see question above), it couldn't hurt to keep your distance. Try to stay 6 feet away from someone who has the flu. The virus spreads in droplets when people talk, cough, or sneeze.
How do you catch H1N1 flu?
H1N1 flu spreads from one person to another by coughing or sneezing, just like regular seasonal flu. The most common way to get the flu is by being close to someone with the flu who is coughing and sneezing. You can breathe in the germs from the air after a sick person coughs. Covering coughs and sneezes and keeping a distance of 6 feet from people who are coughing decreases the spread of flu viruses. Sometimes people may get the flu by touching surfaces with flu viruses on them, and then touching their eyes, mouth, or nose without washing their hands. The virus can live for 2-8 hours on surfaces like countertops and doorknobs. Cleaning those surfaces with ordinary cleaning products is a good idea.

When can a person spread H1N1 flu to others?
People with H1N1 flu can spread it to others beginning 1 day before symptoms start and up to 7 days after becoming sick. This means that you can spread the flu to someone else before you know you are sick, as well as while you are sick. Children, especially younger children, may spread flu germs for longer periods. This is why people with flu-like illness should stay home for at least 7 days even if their symptoms go away sooner.

What can I do to protect myself and my family from getting sick?
There is no vaccine right now to protect against H1N1 flu. You can take these everyday steps to stay healthy:

- Cover your nose and mouth with a tissue or sleeve when you cough or sneeze. Throw the tissue in the trash after you use it and wash your hands.
- Wash your hands often with soap and water, especially after you cough or sneeze.
- Avoid touching your eyes, nose or mouth. Germs spread this way.
- Avoid close contact with sick people.
- If you get sick with the flu, stay away from other people. Stay home from work and school.

What is the best way to wash my hands?
Washing your hands often protects you from all kinds of germs. Wash your hands with soap and warm water for 15 to 20 seconds (about as long as it takes to sing “Happy Birthday” twice through). Soap and water are best. If they are not available, alcohol-based disposable hand cleaners may be used instead.

Should I be wearing a facemask?
You don't need to wear a facemask unless you're taking care of a person who's sick with H1N1 flu or are sick yourself. Wearing masks is a popular reaction to respiratory outbreaks in parts of the world, but it's not a step that the U.S. government has recommended for the current outbreak. The CDC has an online guide to using masks and respirators to prevent spreading flu germs at www.cdc.gov/h1n1flu/masks.htm

What should I do if I get sick?
If you are sick, you should stay away from other people as much as you can to keep from spreading your illness. Stay home! People with flu-like illness should stay home and not attend school or go into the community except to seek medical care for at least 7 days even if their symptoms go away sooner. People who are still sick 7 days after they become ill should continue to stay home until at least 24 hours after their symptoms go away.

When should I see a doctor?
If you become ill with flu symptoms (fever and cough or fever and sore throat), contact your health care provider for advice. Your health care provider will determine whether you need to be seen. If you do not have health insurance or a regular doctor, you may contact your local public health department for referral information. In Berkeley, call 981-5300.
I'm pregnant. Should I do anything extra to protect myself and my baby?
We know that pregnant women are more likely to get sick than others and have more serious problems with seasonal flu. These problems may include early labor or severe pneumonia. We don’t know if the H1N1 virus will do the same, but it should be taken very seriously. We do not yet know how this virus will affect the baby. If there is H1N1 flu in your community pay extra attention to your body and how you are feeling. If you become ill with flu symptoms (fever and cough or fever and sore throat), stay home, limit contact with others and call your health care provider for advice. Your health care provider will determine whether you need to be seen and if you need antiviral drugs. If you have close contact with someone who has H1N1 flu or is being treated for exposure to H1N1 flu, contact your health care provider to discuss whether you need treatment to reduce your chances of getting the flu.

Why were schools dismissed and then re-opened?
Schools and childcare facilities are places the flu can spread easily. Dismissing them can slow the spread of flu but officials also understand that school closures are very disruptive for families and children. Initially, public health officials did not know how sick the H1N1 flu virus would make people. Because the virus seems to be relatively mild right now, officials determined that school and childcare dismissal is not the best approach at this time. If the virus changes to cause more severe disease, or if absenteeism at schools is so high that the schools cannot function, school dismissal may happen again.

Can my sick child go back to school as soon as he or she feels better?
No. It is still important to slow the spread of this disease in our community, and especially among children. With schools open again, it is especially important that sick children and staff stay at home until they are no longer contagious. That means staying home for least 7 days even if their symptoms go away sooner. Students and staff who are still sick 7 days after they become ill should continue to stay home until at least 24 hours after their symptoms go away.

Are there medicines to treat H1N1 flu?
Yes there are medicines, and they are most important for people who are so sick that they need to stay in the hospital, or people who have chronic diseases like heart disease or diabetes. Most people recover from H1N1 flu without needing any special medication. Your doctor will help you decide whether medication is right for you. The prescription antiviral medicines oseltamivir (Tamiflu) or zanamivir (Relenza) can be used to treat H1N1 flu. These medicines can make you feel better faster and make your symptoms milder. They may prevent serious flu complications. They work best if started soon after getting sick (within 2 days of start of symptoms).

Is there a vaccine to protect people from H1N1 flu?
Not yet. Because this is a new virus, the “flu shot” you may have gotten this season does not appear to protect people from H1N1 flu. Effective vaccines may be developed in the future.

What other things can I do to get my family prepared?
It never hurts to think about what you would do if a flu epidemic or other illness hits your community hard. That may mean that schools would be closed and large public gatherings may be discouraged. The CDC website has suggestions on getting ready at home and at work. Examples include: 1) Do you have enough food in the house to feed your family if you had to stay home for a week? 2) Does your employer have a plan in case of a flu pandemic? 3) Are you prepared if you have to work from home for a while? 4) Do you have someone who can take care of your sick child if you can’t stay home with them?
When should I get medical care right away?
Adults should get emergency medical care right away if they have:
- Trouble breathing or shortness of breath
- Pain or pressure in the chest or abdomen
- Sudden dizziness
- Confusion
- Severe or continuing vomiting
Children should be taken to emergency medical care right away if they have:
- Fast breathing or trouble breathing
- Bluish skin color
- Not drinking enough fluids
- Not waking up or not interacting
- Being so irritable that the child does not want to be held
- Flu symptoms improve but then return with fever and worse cough

How safe is it to travel?
CDC has issued an alert to avoid nonessential travel to Mexico. Travel notices are available on the CDC Swine Flu web page at www.cdc.gov/travel. At this time, there are no restrictions for travel within the U.S.

Can I get H1N1 flu from eating or preparing pork, bacon, and ham?
No. Swine flu viruses are not spread by food. You cannot get swine flu from eating pork or pork products. Eating properly handled and cooked pork products is safe.

For further information, please see the following websites or call the Berkeley City Public Health Division at 510-981-5300 or call the California Department of Public Health H1N1 Flu Hotline at 1-888-865-0564, Monday through Friday, from 7 a.m. to 6 p.m., and on weekends from 8 a.m. to 4 p.m.

City of Berkeley Health and Human Services:
www.CityofBerkeley.info/publichealth
California Department of Public Health:
www.cdph.ca.gov/HealthInfo/discond/Pages/SwineInfluenza.aspx
Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC)
www.cdc.gov/h1n1flu