

H1N1 – Is the flu shot safe?

In 2009, the H1N1 virus was found to be made up of genetic elements from four different flu viruses – A combination of the North American swine influenza, North American avian influenza, human influenza, and swine influenza typically found in Asia and Europe. The H1N1 strain is a “reassortment” of human and swine influenza viruses. While viruses with the H1N1 genetic makeup had not be previously found to be circulating in humans or pigs, there is no formal national surveillance system to determine what viruses are circulating in pigs in the United States. On June 11, 2009, the WHO declared an H1N1 pandemic, which is the first since 1968 (CDC MMWR. 2009-04-22).

The much anticipated vaccine for the H1N1 flu virus has finally arrived and is being distributed as fast as it is made. There is an estimate that 50% of the US population will be infected with the H1N1 virus. On October 6th, 2009, The World Health Organization (WHO) restated its confidence in the H1N1 flu vaccine, calling it the most important tool against the pandemic.

Mild adverse side effects such as muscle cramps or headache are to be expected in some cases, but everyone who has access to the vaccine should be inoculated, it said.

Mass vaccination campaigns against the swine flu virus are underway in China and Australia and will be starting soon in the United States and parts of Europe, WHO spokesman Gregory Hartl said.

"It is important to remember that the vaccines, which have already been approved, have been used for years and years and years in their seasonal vaccine formulation and have been shown to be among the safest vaccines that exist," he told a news briefing.

Hartl, asked whether WHO was concerned by reports that some people were reluctant to be injected with the new vaccine, said:

"Certainly we have seen the reports. Again, we would restate that the most important tool that we have to fight this pandemic is the vaccine."

It was doubly important that health care workers be vaccinated, as it protects them as well as patients, he added.

"We would hope that everyone who has a chance to get vaccinated does get vaccinated," Hartl said [Reuters, Tue Oct 6, 2009 3:11pm EDT].