



Public Health Mōno-Gram

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Public Health
Prevent. Promote. Protect.

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Where Are We with the 2009 H1N1 Influenza Pandemic?

“It ain’t over till it’s over.” – Yogi Berra

What Happened?

Do you think this pandemic is a big deal, or has public health and the media “cried wolf” again? Your perspective depends on whether or not you or a family member became seriously ill or died. As of November 14th, more than 47 million have been infected (about 15% of the population), 213,000 have been hospitalized, and more than 9,800 have died. In California, this translates into approx. 4.3 million cases, with 7,546 hospitalizations, and 397 deaths. In the Eastern Sierra (Inyo and Mono County), there have been approx. 4,500 cases, with several dozen hospitalizations, and no deaths. Let’s compare these numbers to the annual seasonal influenza:

- It is estimated that seasonal influenza on the average causes 31 million cases annually in the US. So, even though we are not done yet, there have been 16 million more cases of H1N1 infection than in the average year of seasonal influenza, with nearly 2,000 school closings affecting 616,000 students, and untold days of work absenteeism.
- Seasonal influenza usually causes about 200,000 hospitalizations annually. We are past that, and not finished yet. The impact on the healthcare system has been significant.
- But you may say that the number of deaths is far less than the often quoted 36,000 that die each year from the seasonal influenza. Two comments to give perspective:
 - o Only about 9,000 of those deaths are due directly to influenza or pneumonia. The rest are among persons who have influenza, and die of events like heart attacks or stroke. Think of someone who has a heart attack while shoveling snow, and his death is labeled “storm-related”.
 - o More than 90% of the estimated seasonal influenza deaths are in the elderly, while only 13% of deaths with the 2009 H1N1 influenza have been in those over 65 years of age. The death of an 87 year old person with advanced Alzheimer’s disease is just as tragic as the death of a 22 year old otherwise healthy pregnant woman, but we can agree they are not the same in terms of years of potential life lost. The current pandemic to date dwarfs seasonal influenza in this important measure.

1,090 (11%) of deaths have occurred in children 0-17 years of age, 7,450 (76%) in people 18-64 years of age, and 1,280 (13%) in people over 65 years of age.

Where Are We Now?

National, state, and local influenza activity continues to decrease, although new cases, hospitalizations, and deaths are still continuing at epidemic levels. California still reports widespread activity in the week ending Dec 5th, with 278 hospitalizations and 31 deaths. This includes 2 pediatric deaths, and 2 deaths among pregnant females. Almost all influenza is the H1N1 strain, with seasonal influenza uncommon so far. Resistance to Tamiflu is rare. Other viruses such as RSV are starting to appear, as expected for this time of year.

New data confirms our impression locally that the American Indian population has been especially hard hit. In the 12 states where they represent 3% of the population, they have experienced 10% of the deaths. The reasons may include genetics, poverty, lack of access to care, a low vaccination rate, and a higher incidence of chronic conditions such as asthma, diabetes, and obesity.

Vaccination is now available for everyone through the Health Department. So far, several thousand doses have been given in Mono County. Our paramedics have completed their outreach to the first responder community, and therefore we and the Board of Supervisors are terminating the local declaration of emergency as of this Friday December 18th. The safety record of this H1N1 vaccine, with over 85 million doses now given worldwide, is excellent.

What's next?

Influenza is expected to still be circulating for months and additional waves may come, especially with holiday gatherings and when seasonal strains emerge. The American College Health Association just reported that after weeks of decline, H1N1 influenza activity on college campuses increased 27% from the previous week among students returning from the Thanksgiving break. Will that happen in our schools in January? How bad will the seasonal flu be this year? Will there be a third wave of the H1N1 this spring? Will the virus undergo a critical mutation making it resistant to Tamiflu or a more efficient killer? All of these are unknown possibilities for which we will be very closely watching.

What should you be doing?

Get vaccinated. About 15% of the population has been infected already, 15% vaccinated, 15% with prior protection from years ago, leaving over 50% of the population still vulnerable. Protect yourself and your family over the holidays by getting vaccinated NOW – call 760-924-1830.

To keep from getting sick, stay away from sick persons, wash your hands frequently, drink plenty of non-alcoholic fluids, and get plenty of rest. Enjoy the beautiful outdoors, your family and friends, and all the holiday festivities.

If you get sick, stay home from work, keep sick children out of school, skip that holiday gathering, cover your cough with your elbow, wash your hands frequently, treat your fever, drink plenty of non-alcoholic fluids, and call your healthcare provider if you are concerned, especially if you are pregnant or have a chronic medical condition.