

The Facts

According to the Centers for Disease Control (CDC), hospitals reported nearly 5,000 cases of H1N1 from August 30, 2009 through October 10, 2009. Of 5,000 reported cases, 7% (about 350) were individuals over the age of 65. In fact, individuals between the age of 5-49 years of age represented 49% of the total cases reported. Likewise, the percentage of H1N1 related deaths among individuals 65 years and older was 12%, while among individuals from 25-64 years it was nearly 65%. According to the CDC, people 65 and older are the least likely to be infected with 2009 H1N1 flu. Interestingly, nearly one-third of individuals over the age of 60 have H1N1 antibodies, while children have none.

While the data above seems to indicate that the elderly are not facing a particularly high risk from H1N1, certain chronic medical conditions indicate a higher risk of contracting the illness. These include diabetes, heart disease, asthma, and kidney disease. Additionally, individuals over the age of 65 or individuals with the mentioned chronic medical conditions face a high risk of experiencing serious complications if H1N1 is contracted.

The seasonal flu virus (not H1N1), to which the elderly face a high risk of infection, causes 36,000 deaths on average each year. Of these deaths, nearly 90% occur in people older than 65.

Prevention

The CDC highly recommends people over 65 years of age get a seasonal flu shot. But because the elderly are the least likely to acquire H1N1, they are not even able to get the early doses available at this time. While H1N1 is not a particular risk to the elderly, the seasonal flu continues to be a great concern of the elderly. Therefore, the elderly should still practice standard flu prevention and protection. Washing hands often, avoiding touching eyes, nose, or mouth, and staying away from ill people are all practical applications to prevent illness.

Conclusion

At this point, H1N1 is a concern for the elderly, but one that can be fought using knowledge, practice, and preventative measures already in place for the seasonal flu. Practice flu prevention as usual to stay healthy for years to come.