According to the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC), every year in the United States, on average five percent to 20 percent of the population gets the flu; more than 200,000 people are hospitalized from flu complications; and about 36,000 people die from flu-related causes. Some people, such as older people, young children, and people with certain health conditions, are at high risk for serious complications from the regular “seasonal” flu.

Flu seasons are unpredictable in a number of ways, including the timing of the beginning, severity, and length of the flu season, explains the CDC on its influenza website. However, this flu season (2009-2010), there are more uncertainties than usual because of the emergence of a new 2009 H1N1 influenza virus.

Because many people do not have immune protection against this new virus, particularly children and young adults, there is concern that the 2009 fall and winter flu season may result in more people ill with the flu than usual. This new flu does not necessarily mean that people will be any sicker than usual, just that there will be more people who do get sick.

In past years, seasonal flu activity typically did not reach its peak in the U.S. until January or February, but flu activity has occurred as late as May. However, the 2009 H1N1 virus caused illness, hospitalizations, and deaths in the U.S. during the spring and summer months when influenza is very uncommon—and many more cases are occurring now. The CDC cautions that it is not known when flu activity will be most intense, what viruses will circulate, or how long the season might last.

Understandably, anxiety among the public has been heightened by reports of a global flu pandemic. People are asking questions like: Is it seasonal flu or H1N1? How can I tell the difference? Should I be prepared for both? What about vaccines?

For those involved in public and community health, getting the facts, knowing the available resources, and strengthening partnerships in our communities are key to being prepared. There continues to be almost daily communiqués about the impending flu season, prevention, and vaccine availability from federal and state public health agencies. At the same time, there are numerous flu prevention initiatives being conducted in many venues, from airports and grocery stores to early childhood programs and colleges to hospitals and health centers.

This edition of Focus on Community Health is devoted to providing important information, practical resources, and initiatives for preventing and managing both seasonal and H1N1 flu. By arming ourselves with information, taking steps to prevent the flu, and effectively communicating with communities, community and public health professionals can play a key role in being prepared for what promises to be an uncertain flu season.

Thank you to the sponsors of this edition of Focus on Community Health:

New York Health Plan Association
Cornell Cooperative Extension and Cornell University
The Department of Health and Human Services (HHS), the Department of Homeland Security, the Department of Education, and Sesame Workshop, the non-profit educational organization behind Sesame Street, have teamed up to launch a new, national public service advertising (PSA) campaign designed to encourage American children and families to practice healthy habits and to take steps to prevent the spread of the 2009 H1N1 flu virus. The PSAs featured in this campaign can be viewed on www.flu.gov.

During the spring, the Sesame Workshop produced four different versions of television PSAs featuring Sesame Street’s Elmo and Gordon explaining the importance of practicing healthy habits such as washing your hands, sneezing into the bend of your arm, and avoiding contact with your eyes, nose, and mouth. They have now been reformatted to promote www.flu.gov, the federal government’s one-stop website for all the latest information on the new H1N1 virus and the seasonal flu. The PSAs will be distributed nationwide and will be supported in airtime donated by television stations.

The PSAs are part of an initiative to provide practical steps recommended by the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) to help prevent the spread of the flu virus and other infectious disease.

HHS has distributed the PSAs via satellite to television stations nationwide. Additional PSAs from Congress and other organizations are also being aired to raise awareness of the steps everyone can take to prevent flu.

For more information on how to take steps to prevent the flu, visit www.flu.gov.

Practical Steps for Preventing Flu

- Avoid close contact with people who are sick.
- Keep your distance from others if you are sick.
- Stay home from work, school, and errands when you are sick, and don’t send your children to child care or school if they are sick.
- Cover your mouth and nose when coughing or sneezing. Use a tissue or cough or sneeze into your sleeve—not your hands.
- Wash your hands often with soap and water, especially after coughing and sneezing. Use an alcohol-based hand sanitizer if you are not near a sink.
- Avoid touching your eyes, nose, and mouth. Flu spreads this way.

Source: CDC

Guidance and Communications Toolkits for Flu Prevention

HHS has developed a number of resources for flu prevention including communications toolkits for child care and early childhood providers and universities; guidelines and recommendations for schools and employers; and consumer tips and questions and answers. These, and other materials about seasonal and H1N1 flu are available at www.flu.gov.
In early September, the NYS Commissioner of Health, Richard Daines, MD, along with officials from the State Education Department and the State Emergency Management Office, conducted a series of six town hall meetings to brief local officials and the public on preparations for the expected resurgence of novel H1N1 influenza this fall. This “Novel H1N1 Preparedness Town Hall Tour” launched the state's comprehensive, multi-agency strategy and vaccination plan to prepare for the upcoming flu season.

DOH has been collaborating with other agencies and local governments to plan and enact measures to reduce the impact of H1N1 flu on the public’s health. The H1N1 flu vaccination campaign, which DOH will launch in conjunction with county health departments, will first target specific groups identified by the CDC as either at highest risk for complications from the flu or who are critical to ensuring overall public health such as our health care workers. As more vaccine becomes available, all New Yorkers will have access to the vaccine if recommended by their physician. DOH is also working with its partners at the local and state levels to remind all New Yorkers to receive vaccinations for seasonal influenza.

Governor David A. Patterson also recently announced that insurers must cover seasonal flu and novel H1N1 vaccinations for children who are aged 19 and younger and enrolled in comprehensive health plans. The policy is consistent with New York’s preventive and primary care provisions known as the Child Wellness Law, which require insurance coverage for vaccinations recommended by the Advisory Committee on Immunization Practices (ACIP) of the CDC. This year, ACIP has advised that children should receive both the seasonal flu and novel H1N1 vaccines—this means that, under State law, they must be covered and not subject to co-payment, co-insurance, or annual deductible.

DOH has launched a new website focused on Novel H1N1 influenza that includes how this flu is being tracked in NYS, available public information resources, information for specific groups (e.g., public, health care providers, media, schools, and employers), and other important facts.

For more information, go to www.health.state.ny.us/diseases/communicable/influenza/h1n1.

www.hanys.org/newsletters/focus/focus.cfm
Educational Materials Available through DOH

Posters, brochures, and other communications materials about H1N1 and seasonal flu are available through the NYS Department of Health.

For more details, visit www.health.state.ny.us/diseases/communicable/influenza/h1n1/#resources and www.health.state.ny.us/diseases/communicable/influenza/seasonal/educational_materials.htm.

Health Care Worker Influenza Immunization Now Mandatory

In August, the NYS Department of Health implemented an emergency regulation that requires that health care workers in hospitals, diagnostic and treatment centers, home care agencies, and hospice programs receive annual vaccinations against influenza by November 30 of each year unless they have a medical contraindication to the vaccination or the Health Commissioner determines that there is an insufficient supply of vaccine for the year. According to DOH, the goal of this regulation is protecting the health and safety of vulnerable patients who have a higher risk of serious adverse effects from flu and to assure a healthy and able health care workforce during a very busy fall flu season.

Health care personnel who must be vaccinated include all those affiliated with the employer—employees, physicians, volunteers, contract staff, and students—who have direct contact with patients or whose activities are such that they pose a risk of transmission of influenza to patients or to those who provide direct care to patients. For the upcoming flu season, this regulation will apply to both seasonal and H1N1 immunizations.

Questions and answers and additional information about this regulation are available at www.health.state.ny.us/diseases/communicable/influenza/seasonal/providers/questions_and_answers__health_care_worker_mandatory_influenza_immunization.htm.

NYS Department of Health Looking for ServNY Volunteers

DOH is urging health care professionals and other New Yorkers to sign up at the ServNY registry, a web-based program for recruiting and deploying volunteers to provide essential health services during public health emergencies. An adequate corps of trained volunteers ready to respond quickly to a public health emergency is critical to the success of New York’s health emergency preparedness plan. In the event of a major resurgence of H1N1, volunteers may be needed to provide vaccines and assist in the delivery of other essential services.

Registration in ServNY is open to any health care or mental health professional as well as community members who are willing to serve in administrative or support roles during public health emergencies. Interested individuals can register by going to www.nyhealth.gov/ServNY or by contacting the local county health department or local Medical Reserve Corps.

Established in 1997, the New York State Community Health Partnership (NYSCHP) is a unique private-public partnership with representatives from many different sectors including business, community organizations, education, government, health, and philanthropic organizations that share a common vision of health improvement and have agreed to serve as catalysts and facilitators for health improvement activities throughout New York State.

NYSCHP Steering Committee Members:

American Cancer Society
Cornell Cooperative Extension and Cornell University
Healthcare Association of New York State
Healthcare Trustees of New York State
Medical Society of the State of New York
New York Health Plan Association

New York State Association of County Health Officials
New York State Department of Health
New York State Dietetic Association
New York State Nurses Association
New York State Public Health Association
Schuyler Center for Analysis and Advocacy
Cities nationwide are completing plans to distribute the H1N1 vaccine, which is being provided by federal agencies for free. The U.S. Food and Drug Administration (FDA) approved an H1N1 vaccine in early September, with the expectation that the vaccines would be distributed nationally by early to mid-October. In its statement, the FDA said that the 2009 swine flu vaccines should begin protecting against the illness eight to 10 days after a single dose, similar to seasonal flu vaccines. Side effects to the vaccine may include mild fever, body aches, and fatigue a few days after injection. People with severe or life-threatening allergies to chicken eggs should not be vaccinated, according to the FDA’s website.

New York City plans to offer free immunizations at elementary schools and distribute the vaccine through about 100 health clinics. New York schools will offer an inhaled form of the vaccine for most children, and make shots available for those with conditions that prevent use of the flu mist, such as asthma or developmental disabilities.

Los Angeles has set up a program to distribute free H1N1 flu vaccinations at more than 70 sites, including schools, fairgrounds, neighborhood centers, and community clinics. This program is intended to ease distribution to people who lack access to doctors.

Boston is setting up flu clinics at union halls, churches, community health centers, elderly housing developments, and other public gathering places. City employees will get two hours of paid leave to get vaccinated for seasonal influenza, and hospitals are being encouraged to provide free flu shots.

San Francisco plans to establish up to 20 vaccination centers at or near schools to provide free H1N1 flu vaccinations for children and other groups at higher risk for the illness. The centers would work with schools to provide vaccinations to children in the morning and later in the day to others at high risk from the flu, including pregnant women, health care workers and emergency personnel.

Adapted from Bloomberg News, September 1, 2009

3 Things to Know

1. Novel H1N1 influenza is a brand new flu virus sometimes called Swine flu. Very few people are immune to it.
2. H1N1 is still around, making people sick. People who know a lot about how flu spreads worry that we will see many, many more cases during the regular flu season this fall and winter.
3. If that happens, emergency departments and doctor’s offices could be overcrowded. That’s why everyone needs to make a habit of doing things that will slow the spread of the flu virus.

3 Things to Do

1. Make a habit of washing your hands a lot so that the flu germs you pick up on things like doorknobs and hand rails don’t get into your body. Carry hand sanitizer so you can clean your hands when you’re not near a sink.
2. Always cover your cough so you don’t spray germs into the air. Flu spreads that way. Use a tissue, or cough and sneeze into your sleeve—not your hand. This will help keep flu germs from getting on surfaces that people often touch.
3. Stay home and keep at least six feet away from others if you think you have the flu. It’s easy for people to get the flu if they are exposed to your germs.

3 Places to Go to Learn More

1. Ask your local county health department what else you need to know. Their number is in your phone book.
2. Check out these web sites: www.nyhealth.gov www.fluvax.gov
Health plans have long recognized and stressed the importance of flu vaccine as a vital preventive health measure, and every year contribute to the seasonal flu vaccination campaign in various ways. Plans communicate directly with participating physicians, employers, and, of course, health plan members on the current Advisory Committee on Immunization Practices (ACIP) recommendations and encourage immunizations. They also provide information on where to get vaccinations and who to contact with any questions.

Health plans have many innovative ways to remind people when they are due for an immunization such as sending postcard reminders to all members. These cards include information about the risks of coming down with the flu (both seasonal and H1N1) and advising how and where to obtain flu shots. Member and provider newsletters containing similar information are mailed prior to the beginning of the flu season. Articles and flu information can also be found on health plan websites.

Many plans also include health tips on hold messages. These messages will rotate to include information on colds and flu, and the importance of getting an annual flu vaccine. Some plans are even placing automated telephone calls to members to remind them to get their flu shot.

Coverage for seasonal flu and H1N1 vaccine is provided by health plans in New York. In addition, just as health plans have provided extensive coverage for the administration of seasonal flu vaccines in the past, health plans will continue to provide reimbursement for the administration of H1N1 vaccine to their members by private sector providers in both traditional and non-traditional settings, where contracts with insurers have been established. Health plans are focusing a good deal of effort this flu season to make sure people protect themselves and the people around them against this often deadly but very preventable disease by getting a flu shot.

In late April 2009, the World Health Organization (WHO) announced the emergence of a new strain of Type A influenza and subsequently declared the H1N1 virus as a Phase 6 pandemic, the highest level of warning. It’s important for nurses and health care workers to recognize their role as front-line caregivers, and be knowledgeable to protect themselves and the public from the spread of infection.

Health care workers are abundantly aware of the impact that influenza can have on vulnerable populations, including children, pregnant women, the elderly, and those with health care conditions that place them at high risk for complications from the flu. Nurses should be alert to the characteristics of the seasonal flu strain, as well as the novel strain(s), and the most appropriate measures to prevent spread of the flu virus.

As nurses and individuals, we play an important role in protecting ourselves, our patients, and our families. We should stay informed and take steps to protect our health and lessen the spread of this new virus by adhering to the CDC recommendations (detailed on page 2).

The American Nurses Association (ANA) Code of Ethics (2008) is a social contract between nurses and the public who we serve and provides that:

• Nurses promote, advocate for, and strive to protect the health, safety, and rights of the patient.
• The nurse participates in establishing, maintaining, and improving health care environments and conditions of employment conducive to the provision of quality health care and consistent with the values of the profession through individual and collective action.
• The nurse collaborates with other health professionals and the public in promoting community, national, and international efforts to meet health needs.

Does the code of ethics suggest that nurses obtain the influenza vaccination in order to demonstrate their role in protecting their patients from harm? Perhaps. We do know that primary prevention of influenza is achieved through immunization. Currently, only 36 percent of health care providers obtain their flu shot as a measure of safety and prevention (Kordsmeier, J. and Hancock, D, 2006). However, in NYS, influenza immunizations are now mandatory for certain health care workers through an emergency regulation that went into effect on August 13, 2009 (see related article on page 4).

Nurses and other health care professionals need to play an important role in protecting not only their own health and well-being, but also that of the public for whom they care. Recognize the importance of doing all that you can for yourself, your family, your community, and your patients.
The University of Rochester Medical Center was the 2009 winner of the Community Health Improvement Award for its Health-e-Access (HeA) Telemedicine Network. For the past 11 years, the Healthcare Association of New York State (HANYS) has offered its Community Health Improvement Award in recognition of its members outstanding initiatives to improve the health and well-being of their communities.

The mission of the Health-e-Access (HeA) Telemedicine Network, which began in 2001, is to provide health care for children when and where they need it, by providers they know and trust. Consistent with this mission, HeA has provided telemedicine care and service to children in 23 sites including child care programs, elementary schools, and a program for severely developmentally disabled children. Health information technology is used to connect the children at these sites to a clinician in the child’s own primary care medical practice. The focus has been care of acute illness episodes. A companion teledentistry program is being conducted in inner-city child care centers.

Since September 2008, two of the participating practices have begun using HeA to provide care for chronic childhood disease management, a focus that is expected to grow. HeA is eager to welcome family and internal medicine clinicians into this program to care for common problems in adults, including frail elderly in assisted living and skilled nursing facilities.

Trained telehealth assistants at the child’s site collect information and store and forward the illness history forms, still images, video clips, and audio files directly to clinicians in remote locations through digitized electronic “feeds.” The forwarded documents and images are supplemented as required through videoconferencing. Real-time telemedicine is invaluable for clinical observations (e.g., breathing patterns) and in enhancing the quality of interactions among clinicians, children, family, and telehealth assistants. Videoconference interaction adds facial expression and body language to the communication process, substantially enhancing the potential for useful exchange. Newly designed mobile telemedicine units allow HeA to extend telemedicine visits to any elementary school or childcare program in the city.

Working with more than 20 partners, this program has shown outstanding results.

- In city child care centers, absence due to illness dropped by 63 percent after the introduction of HeA.
- Of the 7,000 telemedicine visits among children in child care and schools, 96 percent were successfully completed at the child site and did not require a follow-up referral to a primary care practice or emergency department.
- In a six-year study, emergency department use was 22 percent less for children with telemedicine access than for matched controls.

Honorable Mentions for the HANYS award were presented to Sound Shore Medical Center of Westchester for its Diabetes Outpatient Education Program and to New York City Health and Hospitals Corporation’s Woodhull Medical and Mental Health Center for its Geriatric Outreach Program.
“Get Ready” Campaign Offers Wealth of Resources

Take a look at the American Public Health Association Get Ready campaign. Launched in 2006, this initiative is designed to help all Americans prepare themselves, their families, and their communities for all disasters and hazards, including pandemic flu, infectious disease, natural disasters and other emergencies. Major highlights of the campaign include a national Get Ready Day, held the third Tuesday of each September, and Get Ready: Set Your Clocks, Check Your Stocks, which encourages people to check their emergency stockpiles when they change their clocks for daylight savings time.

The campaign includes free resources for the public and health workers, including fact sheets, a blog, Twitter messages, podcasts, questions and answers, and a calendar of events. Free resources and materials, including information on H1N1 flu and influenza, are available through the campaign.

[For more information, visit www.getreadyforflu.org/newsite.htm.]

Calendar of Events

Public Health Live! T2B2

This monthly webcast series is designed to provide continuing education opportunities on public health issues. Broadcasts are free and available to all who are interested in furthering their knowledge of public health. The live webcast is always held from 9:00 - 10:00 a.m. ET on the third Thursday of each month.

Upcoming Webcasts

November 19
Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder in Veterans

December 17
A Special on 10 Years of Public Health Live – T2B2

[For more information, or to register, visit www.phlive.org.]

Hospital Creates Flu Prevention Music Video

Earlier this year, the Hospital of the University of Pennsylvania created Baby Be Wise – Immunize, an entertaining and informative music video about flu prevention, created by a nurse and ER volunteer. Health care workers lip sync to a Chinese a cappella group’s doo-wop beat during this five minute video.

[For more information and to view the video, go to YouTube at www.youtube.com/watch?v=ruuggZbAVwko or visit www.acappellanews.com/archive/002058.html.]

Flu.gov

U.S. Government flu website
www.flu.gov

DOH

State of New York Department of Health Influenza website
www.health.state.ny.us/diseases/communicable/influenza

CDC

Centers for Disease Control and Prevention Flu website
www.cdc.gov/flu

World Health Organization

Global Alert and Response – Pandemic (H1N1) 2009

Immunization Action Coalition

Vaccination information for health care professionals
www.immunize.org

Prevent Influenza Now!

Sponsored by the National Influenza Vaccine Summit
www.preventinfluenza.org