

While We Wait for the Vaccine: Taking Charge of Your Health

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Many Kansas families have been anxiously waiting this month to have their children and themselves vaccinated against the pandemic H1N1 flu virus. Regrettably, makers of the new H1N1 vaccine have found that production of the vaccine's active ingredient in their laboratories is occurring much slower than anyone expected.

As a result, the quantity of H1N1 vaccine produced so far – about 22.4 million doses – is lagging well below anticipated levels. At the same time, the level of disease due to the pandemic – including hospitalizations and deaths – has been steadily rising.

The shortage of vaccine is both frustrating and a bit scary.

The good news is that much larger quantities of H1N1 vaccine will become available during November and beyond. Eventually there will be enough vaccine for everyone in Kansas who wants it.

But in the meantime there is more good news: you can take charge of the situation now and reduce the risk your family faces from H1N1 flu, all without the vaccine.

Aside from the highly publicized importance of frequent and thorough hand washing and respiratory etiquette such as covering one's coughs and sneezes, you have got one other powerful tool to slow the spread of the flu and keep yourself safe. It's called social distancing.

Social distancing is the idea that simply by reducing the frequency, proximity and duration of contact between yourself and others the chances of spreading the disease can be reduced. With a little vigilance wherever you go, such as in schools and childcare facilities, at work and in the community, you can dramatically cut your risk of catching the flu.

- Start at home by monitoring yourself and your family members every day for symptoms of influenza. Remain home at the first sign of illness. Try to limit the interaction between family members who are ill and those who are well. Remember that individuals with symptoms of influenza should stay isolated and not return to school or work for at least 24 hours after the fever is gone without taking fever-reducing medicine.
- Check to see if the schools and childcare facilities where your children attend monitor for illness and immediately isolate symptomatic children until they can be picked up. Are concerts or athletic events postponed or altered when there are high levels of influenza-like-illness among students and staff?
- At work, try to create as much space as possible between yourself and your co-workers, and always model good hand hygiene and respiratory etiquette. Are you knowledgeable about your employer's policies for sick leave, and do you know

when you will be allowed to return to work? If illness is prevalent, is there any way you can work remotely from home?

No one likes to wait, and all of us – including me and my family – now find ourselves cooling our heels as we await ever-increasing amounts of vaccine to be produced and distributed. In the meantime, we can all be active participants in the fight against this virus by implementing preventive measures of good hygiene and other proven strategies to avoid exposure to the flu and stay well.

Until there is enough vaccine to put an end to this pandemic once and for all in Kansas, please join me in doing what we can to reduce the spread of H1N1 flu, protecting our families and ourselves. For more information on reducing the spread of H1N1 flu, go to <http://kdheks.gov/H1N1>.

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