



## SOUTHWEST PUBLIC HEALTH DISTRICT

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### **H1N1 influenza vaccine offers safe, effective protection for children, says Health Director**

With Pandemic H1N1 widespread in Georgia and throughout the United States – and with the number of children hard hit by the disease continuing to rise – Southwest Health District is stepping up efforts to educate parents and guardians about the safety and effectiveness offered by vaccinations.

“We want people to have the information they need to make important decisions about the health and wellbeing of their families,” explained Southwest Health District Health Director Dr. Jacqueline Grant. “Children and young adults are being hit especially hard by H1N1 flu. Parents need to know that.”

Grant said that although demand for seasonal flu vaccine in the District was unusually high, when the initial shipment of H1N1 nasal-spray vaccine arrived, the response was disappointingly low.

She said several factors may have contributed to the apparent lack of interest.

“It may be that since we had a lot of cases early on when school started back that people think the worst is over and that there’s no longer any need to get vaccinated,” she theorized. “What we want them to understand is that we need to be prepared for another wave of H1N1.”

The mistaken belief that the infection causes only mild illness could also be contributing the sluggish public response. “We believe there may be people thinking, ‘Well, it just makes people sick for a couple of days, it’s no big deal,’” said Dr. Grant. “Unfortunately, people can become severely ill from influenza. Each year, regular seasonal flu claims the lives of around 36,000 Americans, including children and adults who were perfectly healthy before.”

During the past three flu seasons, 46 to 88 children have died. “But since the H1N1 virus outbreak began in April, it has already been responsible for the deaths of 86 youngsters under 18 in the U.S., and unfortunately, we expect the number to rise as we head into flu season,” Dr. Grant said. “That is very sobering.”

Baker	Calhoun	Colquitt	Decatur	Dougherty	Early	Grady
Lee	Miller	Mitchell	Seminole	Terrell	Thomas	Worth

Grant stressed that for now there is no way to know whether an individual infected with H1N1 will have a mild case that only lasts a few days or a life-threatening illness. “What we do know is that the H1N1 vaccine offers the best protection against catching this disease,” she said.

As for safety concerns, the H1N1 vaccine is being produced identically to seasonal flu vaccine, said Southwest Health District Immunization Coordinator Sue Dale.

“We have heard concern that this vaccine isn’t safe because it was rushed out. However, the same manufacturers who make the seasonal flu vaccine are making the H1N1 vaccine using the same methods and safeguards used over the years to produce seasonal flu vaccine,” Dale said.

Since roughly 100 million people get the seasonal vaccine yearly, it has a proven safety record, Dale pointed out. “No corners were cut to produce the H1N1 vaccine,” she said. “It is monitored for adverse effects just like regular seasonal flu vaccine. And what we are seeing are the same results that we see for season flu vaccine. A few people experience soreness at the injection site, for example.”

Also, Grant said, fears that the vaccine contains dangerous mercury are unfounded. “There is no data to back up claims that thimerosal, a mercury derivative used in tiny amounts as a preservative in some vaccine, causes long-term health problems,” she said. “However, H1N1 vaccine is available in thimerosal-free formulations. In fact, all of the nasal-spray form of the vaccine is produced without thimerosal. Plenty of H1N1 nasal-spray vaccine is available now at all of our county health departments.”

Nasal-mist vaccine, which contains a weakened but live virus, is not for everyone. Those who should not receive it include pregnant women, children younger than 2, people with asthma and other chronic medical diseases and adults 50 and older.

“We have a tool available right now to help protect children against an infection that has caused severe complications, including death, even in healthy children,” Grant said. “We urge parents to take advantage of it.”

H1N1 vaccine is being provided free by Public Health, although administration fees may be charged to Medicaid or Medicare. Private providers are also vaccinating against H1N1. A list of private providers offering H1N1 vaccine to the public is on-line at [www.health.state.ga.us/h1n1](http://www.health.state.ga.us/h1n1).

More information is available by calling local county health departments, by going online to [www.southwestgeorgiapublichealth.org](http://www.southwestgeorgiapublichealth.org) or by calling the District’s toll-free Flu Hotline at 800-829-2255.

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