

## **Document # 10-B**

### **Frequently Asked Questions for the WHO web site Audience: Public**

#### **What is post-pandemic?**

##### **1. What does post-pandemic mean? How do we know that the pandemic is over?**

The H1N1 pandemic was characterized by the emergence of a new influenza virus to which many people had no pre-existing immunity. It caused unusual and extensive outbreaks of disease in the summer months in many countries and very high levels of disease in winter months. It was also characterized by an almost complete dominance of the pandemic virus over other seasonal influenza viruses, and by unusual clinical patterns where the most severe cases occurred most often in younger age groups.

We are now moving into a situation where the virus has spread to all countries, when many people in all age groups in many countries have some immunity to the new virus, and where no large and unusual summer outbreaks have occurred in either Northern or Southern Hemispheres, and where seasonal influenza A (H3N2) and influenza B viruses are being reported in many countries. Based on this overall picture, the evidence is strong that the recent influenza pandemic patterns have been replaced by seasonal patterns of influenza. However, it is important to realize that the new H1N1 virus can be expected to remain for many years and that individual influenza seasons themselves can be highly variable. In some years, the impact can be mild while in other years it can be quite severe.

In the post pandemic period, cases and outbreaks due to the H1N1 virus are expected to continue to occur. In addition, it is most likely that for some period of time, younger age groups, including pregnant women, will continue to be affected disproportionately by severe disease from H1N1, including viral pneumonia. It is impossible to predict if younger people will remain at higher risk over the long term for severe disease or whether and when this will change. Given this picture, it will remain important for people to continue to take prudent steps to protect themselves. Actions to generally reduce risks of influenza infection, such as use of vaccines and hand and respiratory hygiene, will also reduce the risks from H1N1 infection.

Related link:

Pandemic Influenza Preparedness and Response Guidelines

[<http://www.who.int/csr/disease/influenza/pipguidance2009/en/index.html>]

**2. Does the end of the influenza pandemic mean that fewer people will become sick and die of the H1N1 virus?**

The future health impact of the H1N1 virus is not possible to predict. On the one hand, the H1N1 virus is expected to continue to circulate as a seasonal influenza strain for the foreseeable future and because of this, more people will develop immunity to this virus. On the other hand, the virus is also expected to change over time as a result of antigenic drift and these changes may mean that the immunity that has developed to this version of the virus may become less protective against future versions of this virus. In addition, many people were not infected by the H1N1 virus during the pandemic, and therefore there may well be areas of some countries that were less severely affected during the pandemic but that could experience more severe disease later.

**3. Why did WHO take so long to declare the end of the pandemic?**

WHO has been monitoring epidemiological and virological evidence from all parts of the world, including both Northern and Southern Hemispheres, to determine when the pandemic is over. In particular, WHO has waited until the picture in the Southern Hemisphere and tropical countries has become clearer.

**4. What does the end of the pandemic mean for individuals?**

For most individuals, there will not be much impact on their daily lives. Regardless of whether the world is in a pandemic situation or not, influenza viruses pose a risk of disease to many individuals and therefore, individuals should take prudent steps to reduce their risk of infection. Such steps include the use of influenza vaccine when available and especially if they are in a group at high risk for severe illness. Most individuals who become ill can be treated safely at home but caretakers and family members should be aware that if an individual develops symptoms suggesting more severe disease, such as prolonged high fever, trouble breathing, or confusion, then professional medical care should be sought.

**5. Will the H1N1 flu virus continue to cause severe illness among the same higher risk groups?**

Based on available evidence, the H1N1 virus currently continues to pose a higher risk for severe illness in some groups, including young children, pregnant women and those with respiratory or chronic health conditions.

Related links:

[Who is more at risk to severe illness? What about other risks?](http://www.who.int/csr/disease/swineflu/frequently_asked_questions/risk/en/index.html)

[[http://www.who.int/csr/disease/swineflu/frequently\\_asked\\_questions/risk/en/index.html](http://www.who.int/csr/disease/swineflu/frequently_asked_questions/risk/en/index.html)]

## **6. What can individuals do to protect themselves from the H1N1 flu virus?**

Individuals can continue to protect themselves and others from the H1N1 virus, and other influenza viruses, through preventive measures such as practicing good hand hygiene and respiratory etiquette, including covering their mouth when they sneeze or cough. WHO also continues to recommend vaccination against the virus through a monovalent (single virus) pandemic vaccine, or a trivalent seasonal influenza vaccine (which includes the pandemic H1N1 strain, as well as other seasonal strains H3 and B), depending on whichever is available.

Related link:

[What can I do?](http://www.who.int/csr/disease/swineflu/frequently_asked_questions/what/en/index.html)

[[http://www.who.int/csr/disease/swineflu/frequently\\_asked\\_questions/what/en/index.html](http://www.who.int/csr/disease/swineflu/frequently_asked_questions/what/en/index.html)]

## **7. What major public health measures are recommended to countries now?**

Even as we move out of the pandemic period, it is important for countries to remain vigilant and alert for infections and outbreaks and to continue to take steps to protect their populations against influenza.

WHO recommends that countries:

- Maintain monitoring for influenza, through routine respiratory disease surveillance and reporting as well as monitoring and investigating unusual disease patterns suggestive of potential changes in the severity, and monitoring of the H1N1 virus for important changes.
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- Continue prevention and control efforts to reduce the impact of influenza, including vaccination against influenza. The pandemic monovalent H1N1 vaccine and the seasonal influenza vaccines both now cover the H1N1 virus, either may be used depending on which is available and according to national guidelines.

The H1N1 pandemic provided a significant challenge to all countries and WHO encourages countries to assess their experience and identify lessons that can be applied to strengthen their preparedness and response to future pandemics.

## **8. Does WHO still recommend oseltamivir use now that the pandemic is over?**

WHO's guidelines for use of antiviral medicines cover both seasonal and pandemic influenza and should continue to be followed. Although we are now post-pandemic, the H1N1 virus is still circulating as one of the seasonal flu strains. It is likely that we will still see severe illness in higher risk individuals as well as otherwise healthy persons. Early recognition and appropriate treatment remain important.

Related link:

[WHO guidelines for use of antiviral medicines](http://www.who.int/csr/resources/publications/swineflu/h1n1_use_antivirals_20090820/en/index.html)

[[http://www.who.int/csr/resources/publications/swineflu/h1n1\\_use\\_antivirals\\_20090820/en/index.html](http://www.who.int/csr/resources/publications/swineflu/h1n1_use_antivirals_20090820/en/index.html)]

## **9. Why should people continue to vaccinate against the H1N1 influenza virus?**

When it is available, WHO strongly recommends the use of influenza vaccine to protect people as a safe and effective countermeasure to reduce the chances of developing severe illness. This H1N1 influenza virus is expected to continue to circulate worldwide for many years, and many people are still susceptible to infection. WHO particularly recommends vaccination for health care workers and groups at high-risk for severe disease.

Related links:

[Vaccines for pandemic \(H1N1\) 2009](http://www.who.int/csr/disease/swineflu/frequently_asked_questions/vaccine_preparedness/en/index.html)

[[http://www.who.int/csr/disease/swineflu/frequently\\_asked\\_questions/vaccine\\_preparedness/en/index.html](http://www.who.int/csr/disease/swineflu/frequently_asked_questions/vaccine_preparedness/en/index.html)]

## **10. Does pandemic H1N1 vaccine protect individuals against seasonal flu?**

The pandemic H1N1 2009 virus is expected to continue to circulate as one of the seasonal flu strains for some time to come. The current seasonal trivalent vaccine includes the pandemic H1N1 strain, as well as other seasonal strains (H3, B), and will therefore protect against all the expected seasonal influenza viruses. The monovalent (single virus) pandemic vaccine will only protect against the H1N1 virus.

Pandemic H1N1 virus caused most of its severe or fatal disease in younger people, both those with chronic conditions as well as healthy persons, and caused many more cases of viral pneumonia than is normally seen with seasonal influenza.

Since no one can accurately predict which or how many of the circulating influenza viruses will infect them, the trivalent seasonal influenza vaccine will provide the broadest protection. However, in some places the trivalent vaccine is not available and it is still prudent to be vaccinated against the H1N1 virus to prevent severe illness.