FAQs on Influenza A (H1N1-2009) Vaccine

1) What is Influenza A (H1N1-2009) (swine flu)\(^1\)?
   Influenza A (H1N1-2009), previously known as "swine flu", is a new strain of influenza virus that spreads from human to human. As this is a new strain of virus, most people do not have any resistance against it, and it can potentially spread quickly and infect a large proportion of the population in a short period of time.

   You can find out more about the Influenza A (H1N1-2009) at www.h1n1.gov.sg. Alternatively, you may call 1800-333 9999.

   What are its symptoms\(^2\)?
   The symptoms include fever, cough, sore throat, runny or stuffy nose, body aches, headache, chills, and fatigue which can sometimes progress to breathlessness a few days later. Some people may present with symptoms of vomiting and diarrhoea, while others may have respiratory symptoms without a fever. Severe illnesses and deaths have occurred as a result of illness associated with this virus.

2) How can I protect myself against the H1N1 Influenza A virus?
   You are encouraged to get the H1N1 vaccination at any polyclinic. You are also advised to practise good personal hygiene:
   i) wash your hands regularly with soap and water
   ii) avoid touching your face after shaking hands with someone
   iii) use a mask if you are coughing and avoid crowded places
   iv) cover your mouth and nose with a tissue when you cough or sneeze

   To keep germs from spreading, do not touch your eyes, nose or mouth especially after touching other objects or shaking hands with someone. See a doctor immediately if you have fever or flu like symptoms.

3) How many doses do I need?
   Adults, young adults and children 10 years or older need only 1 dose. Younger children 6 months to less than 10 yrs old require 2 doses, to be given at least 4 weeks apart.

4) Why do children below 10 yrs old need to have 2 doses?
   Clinical trials have shown that children below 10 years old need 2 doses so to help them develop sufficient protective antibodies to prevent the influenza A (H1N1) infection.

5) How much does the vaccine cost?
   The prices are as follow:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Age</th>
<th>Dosage</th>
<th>Nett Price</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>10 yrs old &amp; above</td>
<td>1 dose of 0.5ml</td>
<td>$20</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3 yrs to less than 10 yrs old</td>
<td>2 doses of 0.5ml</td>
<td>$40 ($20 per dose)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6 mths to less than 3 yrs old</td>
<td>2 doses of 0.25ml</td>
<td>$40 ($20 per dose)</td>
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6) Why is the price for paediatric dose injection the same as the adult dose?
   We draw the vaccine for children from the same adult injection vial and discard the remaining portion. Hence, the cost of administration to a child is the same as an adult.
7) **My child is turning 3 years old soon. Should he take 2 doses of 0.25ml or 0.5ml?**
The recommended dosage of the vaccination should be according to the **age at the time of vaccination**. If your child takes his first dose before he turns 3 years old, he should take the 0.25ml dose. If the second dose is given after he turns three, he should take the 0.5ml dose.

8) **Is the preservative thimerosal in the multi-dose vial harmful to the children?**
Thimerosal is a very effective preservative that has been used since the 1930s to prevent contamination in some multi-dose vials of vaccines. Thimerosal contains small amounts of ethyl mercury. There is no convincing evidence of harm caused by the low doses of thimerosal in vaccines, except for minor reactions like redness and swelling at the injection site. Numerous studies have also found no association between thimerosal exposure and autism.4,5

9) **Who are the ‘at-risk’ groups who should go for the H1N1 vaccination?**
People who are at higher risk of developing complications from the H1N1 virus include:
- Pregnant women (2nd and 3rd trimester)
- People with chronic medical conditions (lung disorders, heart diseases, diabetes, kidney failure, neuromuscular disorders)
- People with chronically suppressed immunity due to disease or long-term medication.

Presently there are 2 brands of H1N1 vaccines in Singapore: Panvax®, CSL and Pandemrix®, GSK. Pandemrix®, GSK should only be used for people aged 18 and above but NOT for pregnant women. Panvax®, CSL can be used for those 6 months and above, including pregnant women.

10) **Can a person who is not in the priority/at-risk groups still receive the H1N1 vaccination?**
Yes, he/she can still be vaccinated.

11) **Can breastfeeding mothers receive the H1N1 vaccination?**
Yes, breastfeeding mothers can receive the H1N1 vaccination, even the seasonal flu vaccination. Besides helping to prevent the flu in mothers, breastfeeding also allows mothers to pass the antibodies their bodies produce in response to the vaccines to their infants, which can reduce the infants’ chances of getting infected with the flu.

12) **Are there people who should not receive the H1N1 vaccination or who should wait to receive it?**
Women in their first trimester of pregnancy should not receive the vaccination.

If you have had a severe allergic reaction after a dose of seasonal influenza vaccine or are allergic to high protein food (e.g. eggs or chicken protein), you should seek your doctor’s advice before receiving the vaccine.

You should also have fully recovered from moderate or severe illnesses before receiving the vaccine.

People who have previously been tested positive for H1N1 do not need to be vaccinated.

13) **I don’t know if my child is allergic to eggs as he/she has never tried the egg yolk. Can he/she still receive the H1N1 vaccination?**
The H1N1 vaccine is derived from the egg-based product. Hence, we would advise that your child try the egg yolk first to ascertain if he/she is severely allergic to it before taking the vaccination. If the allergy is mild, such as a little rash without breathlessness, he/she can still take the vaccination.

14) **What should I tell my doctor before my vaccination?**
You should inform your doctor if you:
- have a fever or an infection (If you have a fever or feeling unwell, you should postpone your vaccination)
- have received any vaccinations recently
- have been infected by the H1N1 influenza virus previously
- are allergic to any medicines, vaccines or food (e.g. high protein food like eggs or chicken protein)
- have other illnesses or are on medication
- are pregnant

15) **Does someone who had Influenza like illness (ILI) or was suspected of having H1N1 previously need a H1N1 vaccination?**
If your infection was not confirmed through a laboratory test, you may not actually have had the H1N1 infection. Therefore, vaccination against the virus is recommended.

16) **What is the difference between the H1N1 Vaccine and Seasonal Flu Vaccine?**
The H1N1 vaccine protects one against the Influenza A (H1N1-2009) virus. It is different from the seasonal flu vaccine which protects one against the seasonal flu caused by the commonly circulating strains of influenza virus. Each year there are two flu seasons due to the occurrence of influenza at different times in the Northern and Southern Hemispheres.

   The new Southern strain flu vaccine, which will be available from 6 April 2010, will also protect one against the H1N1 virus.

17) **I have been vaccinated against the seasonal flu previously. Do I still need to receive the H1N1 vaccination?**
If you have had the Northern strain flu vaccination in the last 6 months, you may choose to either take the H1N1 vaccination or the Southern strain flu vaccination so that you are also protected against the H1N1 virus.

18) **I have not received any flu vaccination. Should I take the H1N1 vaccination or the Southern strain flu vaccination?**
If you have not received any flu vaccination (neither seasonal flu nor H1N1) in the last 6 months, you may choose to take the Southern strain flu vaccination IF:
   i) you are travelling to Southern hemisphere countries, or
   ii) you may come into contact with travellers from the Southern hemisphere.

Else, you may choose to take the H1N1 vaccination instead.

19) **I have received both the H1N1 and Northern strain flu vaccinations, do I still need to take the Southern strain flu vaccination?**
If you have received both the vaccinations in the last 6 months, you do not need to take the Southern strain flu vaccination if you are not travelling. However, if you are travelling to Southern hemisphere countries or may come into contact with travellers from the Southern hemisphere, it may be advisable to take the Southern strain flu vaccine provided there is an interval of at least 1 week from your last H1N1 vaccination.
However, taking the Southern strain flu vaccination after you have taken the H1N1 vaccination is not mandatory. You may want to discuss with your doctor if it is necessary.

20) **Can the H1N1 vaccination be administrated with other vaccines?**
We recommend that the H1N1 vaccine be administered at least one week apart from other vaccines.

21) **How will I remember which vaccine I have received, whether seasonal flu or H1N1 vaccine?**
The clinic will issue you a card/document that states the vaccine you have received. Information on the date the vaccine is administered and type/batch of vaccine you have received will also be stated.

22) **Is the H1N1 vaccine safe?**
The H1N1 vaccine has a similar safety profile as the seasonal flu vaccine, which has a good track record. So far, the H1N1 vaccine has not been associated with any unexpected adverse effects. As such, serious adverse effects are rare. However, there will be continuous monitoring of the efficacy and safety of the vaccine.

23) **Will I get immediate immunity after vaccination? How long will I be protected for?**
Immunity after vaccination varies from person to person, but you will generally start producing the antibodies that provide protection after two weeks. It will protect the majority of people for at least 6 months to a year. It is important to note that no vaccine provides 100% protection in every person.

The H1N1 vaccine only protects you against the H1N1 2009 influenza virus, which means that you can still be infected by other seasonal influenza viruses. Please discuss with your doctor if you would also like to take the seasonal flu vaccine.

24) **Are there any side effects for the H1N1 vaccination? What are they?**
The common side effects of influenza vaccinations such as the H1N1 vaccine include pain, redness or swelling at the site of injection. However, these side effects usually resolve in a few days.

Occasionally, vaccines may cause some other "generalised" side effects such as fever, headache, muscle aches and pains, or a rash - these side effects may be caused by the vaccine or may be symptoms of a coincidental illness (e.g. viral infection). Again, these side effects usually go away after a few days. Some patients may also experience febrile seizures (fever accompanied by fits).

Very rarely, vaccines may cause severe allergic reactions (or anaphylaxis). Patients may feel severe anxiety, itchy skin rash, swelling of the lips and face or difficulty in breathing. There have been reports overseas of a possible association between influenza vaccinations and Guillain-Barré syndrome (GBS), a rare and sometimes severe condition affecting the body’s nerves. However, the link with vaccination (including with this vaccine) is not definite.

25) **How can I relieve the discomfort of common side effects of vaccination such as fever, pain and swelling?**
For relief of fever and possible pain from the vaccination, you may wish to:
- take paracetamol, or
- place a cold, wet cloth over the injection site for pain, redness, or swelling.

26) **When do I know that a side effect is serious and I need to see a doctor?**
Please see a doctor if you experience any of the following:
- The side effects persist for more than a few days.
- Your fever is high (>38°C) or persists for more than 48 hours (2 days) despite taking paracetamol.
- You have fever accompanied by fits.
- You experience severe allergic reactions (or anaphylaxis) where you may feel severe anxiety, itchy skin rash, swelling of the lips and face or difficulty in breathing.

27) **Where can I get the H1N1 vaccination?**
You can get the vaccination at any polyclinic. If you wish to receive the vaccination at NHG Polyclinics, you may call 6355 3000 to make an appointment.

References

1. FAQs on H1N1 Vaccination from MOH’s website: [http://www.h1n1.gov.sg/](http://www.h1n1.gov.sg/)
2. Q&A on H1N1 Influenza on CDC’s website: [http://www.cdc.gov/h1n1flu/qa.htm](http://www.cdc.gov/h1n1flu/qa.htm)
3. MOH Professional Circular 105/2009 Influenza A/H1n1 (2009) Vaccines Updates
4. Thimerosal in Seasonal Influenza on CDC’s website: [http://www.cdc.gov/Flu/about/qa/thimerosal.htm](http://www.cdc.gov/Flu/about/qa/thimerosal.htm)
5. General Q&A on Thimerosal on CDC’s website: [http://www.cdc.gov/h1n1flu/vaccination/thimerosal_qa.htm](http://www.cdc.gov/h1n1flu/vaccination/thimerosal_qa.htm)