

What Cancer Patients and Cancer Survivors should know about the Flu

The CDC posted “Cancer, The Flu, and You: What Cancer Patients and Cancer Survivors should know about the Flu” on their website (<http://cdc.gov/cancer/flu>). Cancer survivors are not at increased risk for incidence of seasonal and the 2009 H1N1 flu; however they are at an increased risk for complications from flu, even if they have completed their treatments and are cancer free.

Excerpts from this article:

The CDC recommends people with cancer or a history of cancer, as well as the people who live with them or care for them, receive the H1N1 flu shot – not the nasal spray vaccine. Cancer survivors and those who live with or care for them should be vaccinated against seasonal flu every year; again the shot, not the nasal spray vaccine.

The CDC recommends cancer patients and survivors take the following steps to reduce the spread of flu:

- Cover your nose and mouth with a tissue when you cough or sneeze. Throw the tissue in the trash after you use it.
- Wash your hands often with soap and water. If soap and water are not available, use an alcohol-based hand sanitizer.
- Avoid touching your eyes, nose, or mouth. Germs spread this way.
- Try to stay at least six feet away from people who appear ill.
- If you are sick with flu-like illness, stay home for at least 24 hours after your fever is gone except to get medical care or for other necessities. Your fever should be gone without the use of a fever-reducing medicine. Keep away from others as much as possible to keep from making them sick.
- Follow public health advice regarding school closures, avoiding crowds, and other social distancing measures.
- Be prepared in case you get sick with a supply of over-the-counter medicines, alcohol-based hand sanitizer, and tissues.
- Stay informed by visiting CDC's 2009 H1N1 Flu site often.
- Develop a plan in advance with your doctor about what to do if you get sick (when you should call your doctor, whether you will need antiviral medication, and how to get a prescription for antiviral medication quickly if needed).
- Make sure your vaccinations are up-to-date.
- Keep a written record of the type of cancer you have, treatment you have received and when you received it, the name and contact information for your doctor, and a list of medicines you are taking.

Symptoms of the flu include fever, cough, sore throat, runny or stuffy nose, body aches, headache, chills, and fatigue. Sometimes vomiting and diarrhea also accompany the flu. Fever is not always present. **If you have a blood or lymphatic cancer, or you have received chemotherapy and/or radiation therapy within the last month, call your doctor immediately if you get flu symptoms or have been within 6 feet of someone suspected to have the flu!** Your doctor may give you antiviral drugs (such as oseltamivir or zanamivir) to help prevent the flu.

If Cancer survivors and patients think they may have the flu, the CDC recommends:

1. Contact your health care provider and follow his or her instructions.
2. Stay home and away from others as much as possible to keep from making them sick. This means you should avoid public activities, including work, school, travel, shopping, social events, and public gatherings. You should stay home for at least 24 hours after your fever is gone (without the use of fever-reducing medicine), except to get medical care or other necessities.
3. If you need to go to the doctor's office, emergency room, or any other health care facility, cover your mouth and nose with a facemask, if available and tolerable, or cover your mouth and nose with a tissue when coughing or sneezing. Let the facility's staff know you are there because you think you may have the flu.

The CDC recommends antiviral drugs to treat and prevent infection with both seasonal and 2009 H1N1 flu. These drugs stop flu viruses from reproducing in your body and can make the flu milder and also may prevent flu complications. Cancer patients and cancer survivors are on the CDC's priority use list for both the 2009 H1N1 flu vaccine as well as antiviral drugs for flu treatment.