

FLU-ISH THINKING

We have all heard much about the global epidemic of the H1N1 strain of influenza, better known as swine flu. While this illness is in its early stages of contagion in this hemisphere, it's time to separate fact from fiction and begin to weigh the sensible risks and strategies to minimize your personal danger.

So far, the swine flu has spread more rapidly than seasonal influenza infections in the past. As children return to schools this month, exposure and infection rates are likely to rise. The more congested the community, the higher the likelihood that people will contract the illness. Urban areas could expose up to one-quarter of the population. At the same time, this flu has not become more aggressive or harmful as it invades. Most people who have contracted swine flu have fully recovered without medical attention. However, unlike most seasonal flus, people of all ages and health conditions are susceptible to H1N1.

Here are a few reasoned suggestions for you to consider and act upon to minimize the health risks to you and to others:

- Get yourself and your family immunized for seasonal influenza now and for H1N1 influenza when the vaccine becomes available.
- If you develop symptoms of influenza (fever, head ache, muscle aches, dizziness, nausea, vomiting, cough), stay home, minimize contact with others until fever and cough have abated, and seek medical attention if symptoms worsen after the first few days.
- All of us should be scrupulous about frequent handwashing, covering our mouths when we cough and using hand sanitizers that we keep nearby at all times.
- The Florida Department of Health maintains a toll-free H1N1 Swine flu information line. Open from 8 a.m. to 8 p.m., the free call provides public health information updates on a weekly basis in English, Spanish and Creole. The number is 1-877-352-3581.