Flu on Call™: Improving Access to Care in a Severe Pandemic

What is Flu on Call™?

Flu on Call™ is a new initiative led by the U.S. Centers for Disease Control (CDC) to establish a national network of triage lines to use during a severe pandemic. The goals of Flu on Call™ include:

1. improving access to antiviral prescriptions for people who are sick;
2. providing an alternative to face-to-face provider encounters; and
3. reducing surge on medical facilities.

People who contact Flu on Call™ will be guided to appropriate information, resources and, if they’re sick or caring for someone who is, they’ll be able to talk to a clinician for medical advice and access to antiviral medications (if appropriate).

When will Flu on Call™ be used?

CDC, in collaboration with its partners, anticipates using Flu on Call™ during a severe pandemic when many people are becoming ill, and many hospitals and emergency rooms are exceptionally crowded. There may be long waits for care, and hospitals may find it necessary to stop accepting new patients in their emergency departments ("divert" status). In addition, during that time, it may be difficult for sick people to reach their usual provider. Waits for appointment with offices and clinics would likely be much longer than usual.

How can Flu on Call™ support my state or community preparedness plans?

In a severe pandemic, prompt treatment of sick people will be an important response measure. However, the sheer number of people seeking information and care is likely to place a significant burden on healthcare systems in communities. The surge on healthcare facilities could overwhelm an already crowded environment, reducing access to care for people who really need it, delaying treatment, and increasing the likelihood of influenza transmission.

Flu on Call™ aims to reduce the need for face-to-face provider encounters by establishing a network of telephone triage lines that provide access to information and care. People who are worried, but are not sick, can get the information they need and stay home, reducing their exposure to sick people, and reducing the spread of disease. Flu on Call™ would be activated during a severe pandemic when the medical care system is highly impacted. It is not meant to serve as a replacement for medical clinics or practices. Instead, Flu on Call™ will serve as a resource for sick people who cannot access their usual sites of medical care. Flu on Call™ supports the preparedness efforts that public health officials have established by addressing public needs at the site of care that best suits their circumstances.

What happens when someone calls Flu on Call™?

Callers will dial a special toll-free number, which will be routed to a United Way 2-1-1 call center. A trained Information Specialist will determine the caller’s needs. If the caller is not sick and only needs information, the Information Specialist will provide the information or direct the caller to public health information sources. If the caller is sick (or taking care of someone who is) and belongs to a participating health plan or system with a triage
line, he or she will be transferred there. If the caller is sick (or taking care of someone who is) and has no participating health plan or cannot reach his or her usual provider, the Information Specialist will transfer the caller to the poison center that serves his or her community. A poison center clinician, working under a specific protocol, will triage the caller, provide medical advice and information, and provide access to antiviral medications over the phone, if it’s appropriate.

People who are uncertain about their symptoms or who are worried about exposure to pandemic influenza and need information can get it through Flu on Call™, avoiding unnecessary visits to emergency rooms or healthcare centers. By addressing public needs by telephone, Flu on Call™ aims to reduce the surge on medical facilities and reduce the spread of pandemic influenza in your community.

Who is involved in Flu on Call™?

Flu on Call™ is a collaborative effort between CDC and several core partners including: American Association of Poison Control Centers (AAPCC); the Association of State and Territorial Health Officials (ASTHO); the National Association of County and City Health Officials (NACCHO); Public Health Management Corporation (PHMC); the U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs; United Way 2-1-1; and the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services Health Resources and Services Administration (HRSA). Flu on Call™ aims to leverage systems already in place, supporting local initiatives without placing additional demands on them.

How do we know Flu on Call™ can work?

Flu on Call™ is modeled on successful statewide projects that were implemented during past pandemics. For example, during the 2009 – 2010 H1N1 pandemic influenza response, Minnesota established the statewide Minnesota FluLine. Registered nurses staffed these telephone lines and triaged callers using a single, collaboratively developed protocol that was provided by the Minnesota Department of Health. For callers who met certain criteria, the Minnesota FluLine provided medical advice and access to prescriptions for antiviral medications for callers.

The Minnesota FluLine fielded more than 27,000 calls between Oct. 29, 2009, and March 31, 2010. The Minnesota Department of Health estimates that the Minnesota FluLine may have prevented up to 11,000 in-person healthcare visits to emergency departments, clinics, and doctors’ offices during the 2009 H1N1 influenza pandemic. Flu on Call™ was inspired by the success of Minnesota’s experience.

For more information about Flu on Call™, please contact:

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