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Past Flu May Protect Healthy Adults From H1N1 Effects (Update 1)

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By Pat Wechsler



Nov. 16 (Bloomberg) -- Healthy adults may have some protective immunity to the swine flu because of exposure to seasonal H1N1 viruses circulating in the population the past 20 years, researchers said.

This year's H1N1, known as swine flu, shares molecular similarities with earlier strains that may give adults enough resistance to lessen the severity of the 2009 outbreak, according to a study by **Bjoern Peters** and Alessandro Sette at the La Jolla Institute of Allergy and Immunology in La Jolla, California. They tested viruses that circulated from 1988 to 2008 and the blood from adult donors, according to the report published today in the **Proceedings of the National Academy of Sciences**.

Swine flu, first identified in April, has spread at an unprecedented rate, with the most severe cases affecting people younger than 25, pregnant women and those with underlying health conditions such as asthma and diabetes. As many as 22 million have been infected in the U.S. and 3,900 have died, according to the **U.S. Centers for Disease Control and Prevention**.

"This may explain why the pandemic has not been as severe as expected," said Alison Deckhut-Augustine, a program manager with the **National Institute of Allergy and Infectious Diseases**, which funded the study.

Molecular Structure

The similar molecular structures of the flu strains involve epitopes that may set off white blood cells called T-cells that lessen the symptoms of the disease, the study said. The similarities aren't enough to trigger immunity to the current strain of H1N1, the researchers said.

Deckhut-Augustine said H1N1 before 1957 shared proteins that would trigger antibodies, allowing those older than 65 to be the least likely to contract swine flu.

Adults may get some protection from this year's seasonal flu vaccine if the H1N1 strain included in the shot shares epitopes with the swine flu circulating, she said.

"Adults should still get vaccinated" for swine flu, Deckhut-Augustine said, to ensure they are protected.

About 36,000 people die each year in the U.S. from seasonal flu, according to the CDC. From 5 percent to 20 percent of the population gets sick with the virus annually, leading to more than 200,000 hospitalizations. The majority of deaths from seasonal flu are among people older than 80.

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