The best policy this year is to avoid catching the flu.

But if that doesn’t work, it will be useful to understand the differences between the two main types, seasonal flu and Novel Influenza A (H1N1), which in some circles remains known as “swine flu.”

Both are respiratory illnesses caused by viruses, and both are thought to have similar modes of transmission.

Novel H1N1 virus, however, is a new virus. That means people will have no previous exposure or immunity. This enables it to spread faster and cause more serious illness in normally healthy people. Seasonal flu, on the other hand, has been around before, so people might have some level of immunity due to previous exposure.

Novel H1N1 affects younger people disproportionately. The highest number of Novel H1N1 cases is occurring in people fewer than 24 years old, and the highest rates of severe illness and hospitalizations are in those under 50. Seasonal flu, by comparison, typically causes more serious illness in the elderly.

While Novel H1N1 flu and the seasonal flu virus have similar symptoms (that include fever or signs of fever along with cough or sore throat, and runny nose, body aches, headaches or fatigue), a significant number of people who have been infected with Novel H1N1 flu virus have also reported diarrhea and vomiting.

A Novel H1N1 vaccine is under development and may be available in the fall. In the event supply is limited, CDC has identified priority groups to receive the vaccine before others. By contrast, a seasonal flu vaccine, which many railroaders receive once a year, will not protect against Novel H1N1.

If you have questions, please contact the medical department at (800) 552-2306.