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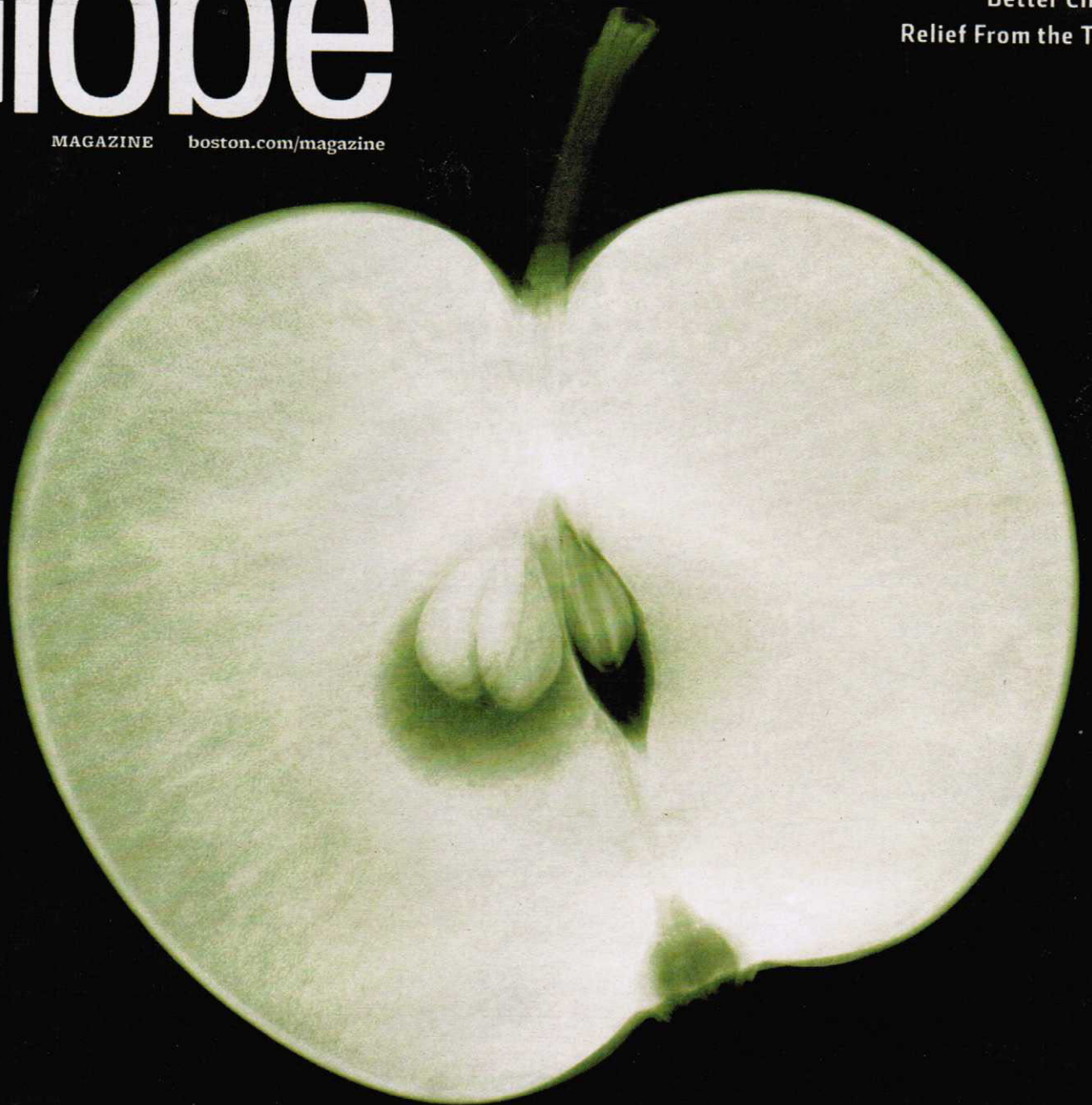
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MAGAZINE

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SPECIAL ISSUE

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YOU VS. THE FLU

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Four Screens to Consider and One to Skip

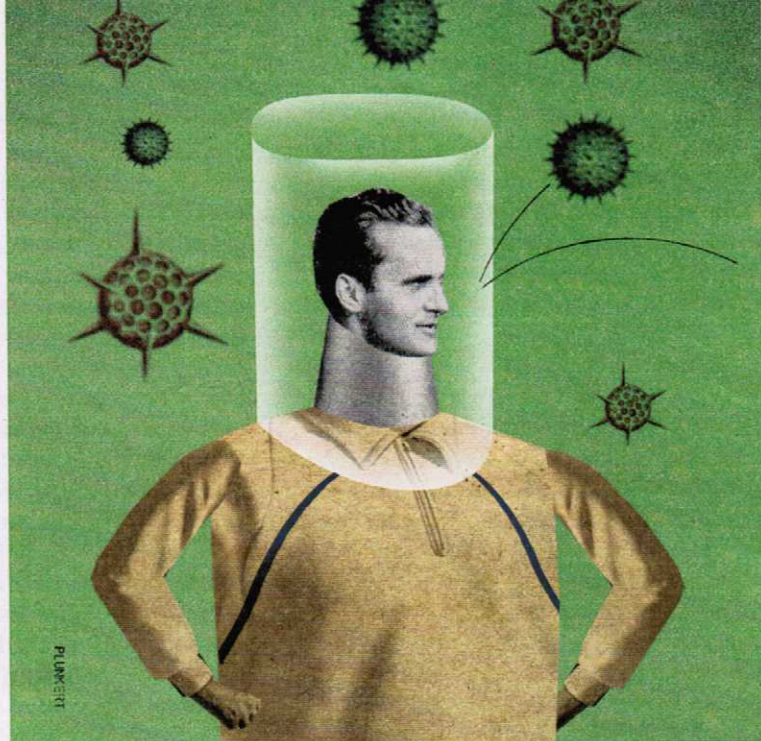
The estimates are alarming: Public health experts say that because of the combination of swine flu and seasonal flu,

as many as 20 percent of Boston residents will experience flu symptoms this fall and winter.

But there's good news, too. Small quantities of swine flu (or H1N1) vaccine are set to reach Boston any day now, several weeks sooner than previously expected. And new research suggests that adults probably need just one dose of the vaccine (not two, as originally thought) to resist swine flu, meaning there may be more vaccine to go around. "The more people we can vaccinate early in the season, the better off we are as a city," says Barbara Ferrer, executive director of the Boston Public Health Commission.

Still, until a larger supply becomes available over the coming weeks and months, the vaccine will only be offered to people at particular risk of getting sick or developing complications. Even if you can't get an H1N1 shot for a while, Ferrer and others say simple habits can substantially reduce your chances of getting sick with swine or seasonal flu, or spreading flu to others if you do get sick.

Wash your hands. "This can have a very real impact on the spread of the virus," says Dr. Richard Zane, vice chairman of emergency medicine at Brigham and Women's Hospital. Clean your hands thoroughly several times a day. Lather up with soap and warm water for 20 seconds, roughly the time it takes to sing "Happy Birthday," says Dr. Snehal Shah, a pediatrician with the Boston Public Health Commission. If you don't have access to a sink, hand



ARE YOU READY FOR FLU SEASON?

The H1N1 vaccine won't be available to everyone for weeks. Here's what you can do now.

BY ERIN O'DONNELL

sanitizer that contains at least 62 percent alcohol will provide similar protection, Zane says.

Cover your cough. Flu viruses are transmitted through the air by coughing, sneezing, or talking. If you need to cough or sneeze, cover your mouth with your hands (and then wash them) or cough into your elbow.

Stay home. If you develop flu symptoms – a fever of at least 100 degrees, cough, aches, sore throat, vomiting, or diarrhea – stay at home, and “plan on staying home for four days or until your fever has been gone for 24 hours, whichever is longer,” Ferrer says. That's fever-free *without* the aid of meds.

Get the vaccine if eligible.

When the H1N1 vaccine is available, the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention recommends that five groups get priority: pregnant women (who were especially vulnerable to complications during the spring outbreak); people who spend a lot of time with babies under 6 months (because these infants can't get flu vaccines); health care and emergency workers; young people 6 months to 24 years of age (the age group hardest hit during the spring outbreak); and adults up to age 64 who have chronic health conditions like asthma or diabetes, which may increase the chance of complications. The elderly seem largely immune from H1N1.

Pay attention if pregnant. Pregnant women with flu symptoms should call their doctor immediately, says Dr. Laura Riley, medical director of labor and delivery at Massachusetts General Hospital. “The epidemiology thus far suggests that when pregnant women get influenza, they are more likely to have respiratory complications and be hospitalized,” she says.

Get a seasonal flu jab. While many of us can't get a swine flu vaccine for a while, the seasonal flu shot is available now. Public health officials are urging people to get one; Mayor Tom Menino has offered Boston city employees two hours of paid time off to get the shot. “If you can protect yourself against one of the sets of viruses that are circulating, that will help you stay healthy,” Ferrer says, “and it will reduce the burden of illness that needs to be treated by our medical care providers.”

Skip the ER, unless... To prevent the illness's spread, experts stress that people with flu symptoms should not visit the emergency room unless they exhibit red-flag symptoms: difficulty breathing, chest pain, bluish skin color, sudden dizziness, or severe and persistent vomiting. If you wonder if an ER visit is warranted, call your doctor, Ferrer says.

Keep it in perspective.

Because swine flu is a new virus, few people have immunity to it, meaning that greater numbers will get sick, and the illness can spread fast. “But it's not that this virus is more deadly or will make an individual sicker,” Zane says. ■

Erin O'Donnell is a freelance writer and former editor at Natural Health magazine. Send comments to magazine@globe.com.

THE NEWS IN MEDICAL TESTS

> CORONARY CT ANGIOGRAPHY This technology uses X-rays to scan the heart and arteries, producing 3-D images and a clear view of any arterial plaque. The scan takes just seconds but, like all CT scans, exposes patients to a dose of radiation, says Dr. Thomas Risser, director of the cardiac noninvasive lab at Cambridge Health Alliance. This is less concerning if a patient receives a single scan, but Risser says it may be harmful if a person needs frequent scans.

—E.O.