



COMMENTARY: Profit on H1N1 with orange juice, booze stocks

By: Christian Moises, News Editor | August 31, 2009 | 0

If you're looking to get into the stock market or diversify your portfolio, orange juice is the way to go right now.

There hasn't been any direct connection I can find, but it is ironic that orange juice futures are up 45 percent in the past six weeks as fears of H1N1 multiply every day.

While orange juice is considered a 52-week commodity because of its nutritional value, trading activity is busiest in January, February and March, when flu season reaches its peak, though H1N1 is expected to hit its stride in mid-October.

Who doesn't run to the store after work to buy juice when they feel that scratchy throat?

Maybe all this hype about H1N1 could be good for business. Stores should heed that advice and start stocking up now on hand sanitizer, cold and flu remedies, orange juice and tissues.

Yes, we need to be prepared. Yes, we need to know how to protect ourselves, which isn't really any different than any other flu season. Yes, the health care industry doesn't exactly know just yet how to control this strain or what it will actually bring.

Like hurricane season, it's a hope for the best but prepare for the worst scenario.

But is it worth all the hysteria?

The Centers for Disease Control and Prevention estimated that an average of 36,000 people in the United States died of flu-related cases each year during the 1990s. A White House report last week expects half the U.S. population will be infected and 90,000 people could die because of H1N1 alone.

While those are big numbers, does an extra 60,000 possible deaths really warrant the White House scaring the heck out of everyone?

Just to compare, the last major flu pandemic in 1918 infected about 500 million people worldwide and led to an estimated 50 million deaths. And that was when the world's population was smaller and medicine wasn't as advanced.

I don't have children, but I do respect parents' concerns about possible outbreaks at school. However, there's been talk of school closures if the rate of infection reaches a certain level. That's fair.

It's the same theory as the workplace. Don't come to work sick and risk infecting the office. But should companies consider altering their sick day plans or changing work hours to accommodate the "new flu?"

A 2006 study by Mercer Human Resources Consulting found that the average American company offers employees 8.1 paid sick days a year, and the average worker takes about 5.2 sick days annually.

That leaves three days a year. Mix in unused vacation time and you should be good. Point is this is not the black plague. It's just the flu.

This paranoia really couldn't come at a worse time for the health care industry, especially in a city such as New Orleans where hospitals continue to recover four years after Hurricane Katrina. Emergency rooms that have reopened already are overcrowded, not to mention that the number of available beds is still far below pre-storm figures.

With all the hype about 60 million to 120 million Americans potentially catching H1N1, everyone who sneezes or coughs more than once will run out of the office and head straight for the nearest ER.

When fears started earlier this year, there was talk of bans on travel and even large gatherings. That was around the time of Jazz Fest.

The recently renewed fears come at the beginning of football season, which is king in south Louisiana. But based on the precautions Russian sports fans were encouraged to take, New Orleanians may be a step ahead in their flu preparations depending on their tailgating tendencies.

In July, the head of Russia's soccer supporter association encouraged the country's fans to drink if they were traveling to Britain for Russia's World Cup qualifier game.

"We urge our fans to drink a lot of Welsh whiskey as a form of disinfection," Alexander Shprygin told Reuters. "That should cure all symptoms of the disease."

Forget the vaccines and over-the-counter medications and head to your local bar or liquor store. This is preventative medicine New Orleanians know how to handle.

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