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National Concern for Healthcare Infections
Raising Awareness ~ Supporting You
Working for Patient Safety
Registered Charity No: 1128828

01942 208804



Full Member

info@nc-hi.com

About Swine Flu

What is swine flu?

Swine flu is a respiratory illness caused by a virus that usually infects pigs. People do not normally get swine flu but human infection can happen. The latest outbreaks in countries around the world have been caused by a new version of the swine flu virus called influenza A/H1N1v.

Why is this virus such a threat?

People have some natural immunity to flu types (strains) that are in common circulation, but not to strains that circulate in other animals. Sometimes, humans and animals can pass strains of flu back and forth to one another, such as when people become ill with bird or swine flu. This usually occurs after a human has direct and close contact with animals that are ill. Mixing of human and animal flu viruses can lead to the development of new, changed viruses, such as the one that is currently circulating. Because they are new, people may have little or no immunity to them and they may have the ability to cause infection and spread quickly.

What are the symptoms of swine flu?

The symptoms of this swine flu in people are similar to the symptoms of regular human seasonal flu and include:

- Fever
- Fatigue
- Lack of appetite
- Coughing
- Sore throat
- Pain in muscles and joints
- Headache and chills.

Some people with swine flu have also reported vomiting and diarrhea.

Can I catch it?

The virus is contagious and can spread between people, although it is not known how easily. Transmission of this new flu virus is thought to occur in the same way as seasonal flu:

- From person to person by coughing or sneezing.
- From touching an object such as a door handle which has virus on it from someone infected with flu.

There is no risk of catching the illness from eating properly handled and cooked pork or pork products. Swine flu viruses are not transmitted by food. General hygiene can help to reduce transmission of all viruses, including the swine flu virus. This includes:

Covering your nose and mouth when coughing or sneezing, using a tissue when possible

- Disposing of dirty tissues promptly and carefully
- Maintaining good basic hygiene, for example washing hands frequently with soap and water to reduce the spread of the virus from your hands to your face or to other people
- Cleaning hard surfaces (such as door handles) frequently using a normal cleaning product.

I think I may have been exposed to the swine flu virus - what should I do?

If you think you may have swine flu, you should first check your symptoms on www.nhs.uk, call NHS Direct (0845 46 47) or call the Swine Flu information line on 0800 1 513 513. If you are still concerned, you should call your GP, who can provide a diagnosis over the phone.

It is also important to make sure you follow the basic hygiene precautions described above.

Treatment:

Can swine flu be treated?

The swine flu virus can be treated with antiviral medication called oseltamavir (Tamiflu) and zanamivir (Relenza), which reduce the development of the virus and lessen the symptoms.

Antiviral medication does not cure the infection, but reduces its impact and helps the body recover. It should be taken as soon as possible, ideally within 48 hours of the infection starting.

When is antiviral medication given?

People who have the virus will be offered antiviral medication.

How will I get antiviral medication if I need it?

People with symptoms and others at risk will be assessed by their GP. If Swine Flu is confirmed, the patient's GP will give them an authorisation voucher, which a flu friend can take to an antiviral collection point to pick up their antivirals. This may be a pharmacy or a community centre.

The Department of Health is advising that everyone establish a network of "flu friends" - friends and relatives - who can help if you fall ill. They could, for example, collect medicines and food for you.

Is there a vaccine to protect against swine flu?

Not yet, because the virus that is circulating is a new strain. However, a vaccine is already being developed to immunise people against swine flu. The government has said that it expects the first batches of vaccines to arrive in August, with around 60 million doses available by the end of the year - enough for 30 million people - with more following after that.

Health protection advice:

What can I do to protect against infection?

General hygiene can help to reduce transmission of all viruses, including swine flu.

This includes:

Covering your nose and mouth when coughing or sneezing, using a tissue when possible

- Disposing of dirty tissues promptly and carefully
- Maintaining good basic hygiene, for example washing hands frequently with soap and water to reduce the spread of the virus from your hands to face or to other people
- Cleaning hard surfaces (e.g. door handles) frequently using a normal cleaning product
- Making sure your children follow this advice.

Do I need to wear a face mask?

Face masks of the type worn by surgeons are normally used in healthcare settings such as hospitals and clinics. This is to reduce the risk of healthcare professionals passing viruses or bacteria to patients undergoing certain procedures, such as operations.

The wearing of face masks by healthy people, who are not involved in caring for people who are ill, is not recommended.

However, there are some circumstances when wearing a face mask may be beneficial, for instance for:

- People with swine flu when they are in contact with other people (to reduce the risk of passing on infection)
- Healthy people when they are caring for a patient with swine flu (to reduce the risk of getting an infection)
- Face masks are also recommended for healthcare professionals when they are testing people for swine flu pandemic and preparation

What is a pandemic?

A pandemic is a sudden outbreak of an infectious disease, such as flu, that spreads quickly affecting vast numbers of people in different countries across the world. When new flu viruses are introduced into the environment, humans do not have any natural immunity to protect against them. Therefore, there is a risk that new flu viruses could cause a pandemic if the virus passes easily from person to person.

What is happening elsewhere in the world?

A number of countries around the world have confirmed cases of swine flu. The World Health Organization (WHO) is coordinating the global response to the human infection, working with authorities in affected countries.

What does pandemic Phase 6 mean?

The World Health Organization (WHO) uses a series of six phases of pandemic alert to inform the world of the seriousness of the threat and the need to launch progressively more intense preparedness activities. WHO has raised its pandemic alert level to Phase 6.

Phase 5 was used to describe the situation where there is spread of the virus from person to person into at least two countries in one WHO region. While most countries will not necessarily have been affected at this stage, the declaration of Phase 5 was a strong signal that a pandemic was imminent and that the time to finalise the organisation, communication and implementation of the planned measures was short. Phase 6 is used to describe a pandemic situation where there are outbreaks of infection in communities in at least one other country in a different WHO region in addition to that stated in Phase 5. The declaration of Phase 6 shows that a global pandemic is under way.

Does this mean the situation is more dangerous?

The move to Phase 6 should not be a cause for concern. WHO's decision to declare a pandemic is based on what is happening globally with swine flu and does not suggest a sudden shift in the UK situation.

Advice to the public and healthcare staff remains unchanged.

Around the world we are seeing an increase in cases and the same can be said for the UK. We may well see further rises but it remains difficult to predict what will happen over the next few weeks. Flu activity usually reduces at this time of year, and this normal seasonal pattern may take over at any time.

Is the infection becoming more severe?

The move to Phase 6 does not mean the infection is becoming more severe. It reflects the level of spread of the infection, not a change in its severity.

There is good evidence here in the UK that for most people so far the disease has been generally mild although it is proving severe in a small minority of cases. The small number of cases that have been affected more severely is to be expected and acts as a reminder that even with seasonal flu people can become very unwell - even healthy people but particularly among those in at risk groups or with underlying medical conditions.

Is the disease spreading rapidly?

Swine flu is spreading fast in the UK with several hundred new cases being confirmed daily and we are seeing a number of clusters around the country where the disease is spreading within the community. It has been clear for some time that numbers of cases have been rising. This comes as no surprise and is something we have always expected to see.

Scientists expect to see rapid rises in the number of cases. We have always known it would be impossible to contain the virus indefinitely, so now the UK is in 'treatment phase' responding to this pandemic by treating the increasing numbers affected by swine flu.

Why are there so many cases in schools?

Much of the spread that we have seen so far has happened in schools. We know that children are especially vulnerable to infections and can receive greater exposure than adults due to a number of factors including their mixing patterns at school and lack of understanding about good infection control and the importance of respiratory and hand hygiene.

Who is most at risk?

Those at higher risk include those with chronic lung, kidney or heart disease, under-

fives, over 65s and pregnant women.

Although this disease is generally mild in most people so far, it is proving severe in a small minority of cases.

It is important that anyone belonging to a high-risk group starts taking antivirals as soon as possible if they are diagnosed with swine flu.

What is being done to protect the public?

The UK has now moved to a treatment phase to manage the current pandemic flu outbreak.

As a result GPs will diagnose cases on the basis of clinical observation rather than laboratory testing. Everyone who has flu-like symptoms, will be assessed by a doctor and if diagnosed with swine flu will be offered antivirals to manage their illness.

The Health Protection Agency will continue to be that of providing scientific advice to Government and is using its established surveillance systems to monitor the spread and incidence of the virus.

How well prepared is the UK?

The UK government is well prepared to manage a pandemic - the UK is said to be one of the best prepared countries in the world.

Nevertheless everyone can play their part in preventing the spread of swine flu by practising good respiratory and hand hygiene.

What is the role of the Health Protection Agency?

The Health Protection Agency's role in this treatment phase will continue to be that of providing scientific advice to Government and ensuring healthcare professionals have access to the latest clinical advice from the HPA.

We will also be using our established surveillance systems to monitor the spread and incidence of the virus. Locally, the agency advises on outbreak control issues. It will continue to monitor the situation closely

Swine flu and school:

Why does swine flu seem to be particularly affecting children and young adults?

Children are proving to be highly efficient carriers of the swine flu (H1N1) virus and schools provide the perfect environment for it to spread.

What is the HPA's policy on school closures?

Because swine flu is now circulating within the community, closing a school would not help to slow the spread of the virus as people could still be exposed outside the school. However, if there are special circumstances - for example, a school with children who are particularly vulnerable to infection - then school closures might still be recommended in that situation.

Isn't it better for my child to catch this now to develop some immunity in case this comes back more seriously?

This is good evidence that in the majority of swine flu patients the disease is generally mild, but it is also proving severe in a small minority of cases. It is preferable to avoid exposure to the virus if possible, which also helps to protect high-risk groups from unnecessary risk. However, children should not be kept off school if they are well and their school is open.

Our school is open again – what does this mean?

If your school has reopened, it means that any confirmed cases are not considered to pose a risk of further spread to other pupils, or that the virus is already circulating within your community and keeping the school closed would not help to slow the spread of the virus as people could still be exposed outside the school.

What can schools and parents do to slow the spread?

Everyone can play their part by practising good hygiene:

- Washing hands frequently with soap and water to reduce the spread of virus from your hands to face or to other people.
- Cleaning hard surfaces (e.g. door handles) frequently using a normal cleaning product.
- Covering your nose and mouth when coughing or sneezing, using a tissue when possible.
- Disposing of dirty tissues promptly and carefully.
- Making sure children follow this advice.

If you think you may have swine flu, you should first go online and check your symptoms on www.nhs.uk, call NHS Direct (0845 46 47) or call the Swine Flu information line on 0800 1 513 513. If you are still concerned, you should call your GP, who can provide a diagnosis over the phone.

Ref: HPA advice on Swine Flu www.hpa.org.uk

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