

Q&As

27th April 2009

Please refer to the HPA website for the latest information

1. What is swine influenza?

Swine Influenza is a respiratory disease of pigs caused by type A influenza viruses. Outbreaks of swine influenza happen regularly in pigs. People do not normally get swine influenza, but human infections can and do happen. Most commonly, human cases of swine influenza happen in people who are around pigs but it's possible for swine influenza viruses to spread from person to person also.

Recently, cases of human infection with swine influenza A (H1N1) viruses have been reported in the US and isolation of the same virus from cases in an outbreak in Mexico has indicated more widespread human-to-human transmission. Other countries worldwide are reporting suspected cases.

2. Is this swine flu virus contagious?

It has been determined that this virus is contagious and is spreading from human to human. However, at this time, it not known how easily the virus spreads between people.

3. How common are cases of swine influenza?

Infection with swine influenza virus has been detected occasionally in humans since the 1950s and human disease is usually clinically similar to disease caused by infections with human influenza viruses.

Cases of swine influenza in humans usually occur after a history of exposure to pigs, i.e. direct or close contact with infected pigs. Person-to-person transmission, as suspected in the cases currently under investigation in the US and Mexico, have been previously reported but appear to be rare.

There have been no cases identified in the UK for at least ten years.

Through the regular seasonal influenza surveillance that is done in Europe, a single case was reported in November 2008 in Spain, with mild symptoms.

In the US there is an active swine influenza surveillance programme to monitor pig viruses as they see more diversity in viruses than in any other country.

4. What are the symptoms of swine influenza?

The symptoms of swine influenza in people are similar to the symptoms of regular human seasonal influenza infection and include fever, fatigue, lack of appetite, coughing and sore throat. Some people with swine flu have also reported vomiting and diarrhoea.

5. What is the difference between seasonal influenza, avian influenza, swine influenza and an influenza pandemic?

Influenza viruses are commonly circulating in the human and animal environment. Different strains can cause illness in humans, birds and pigs.

Seasonal influenza is caused by influenza viruses that are adapted to spread in humans (human influenza). Humans have some natural immunity to the strains that are in common circulation, and this immunity can be boosted by immunisation with a seasonal influenza vaccine.

Avian influenza is caused by influenza viruses adapted for infection in birds. Similarly, swine influenza is caused by influenza viruses adapted for infection in pigs.

These illnesses all elicit the same respiratory symptoms in their hosts. Sometimes, humans and animals can pass strains of influenza back and forth to one another, such as when humans become ill with avian or swine influenza, usually from direct contact with animals who are ill.

Mixing of human and animal influenza viruses can lead to the development of changed viruses with the ability to cause infection and spread in the human population. There may be little or no immunity in the human population to these new viruses.

An influenza pandemic is defined as a new or novel influenza virus that spreads easily between humans. When new influenza viruses are introduced into the environment, humans don't have any natural immunity to protect against them. Therefore, there is a risk that that new influenza viruses could develop into a pandemic if the virus passes easily from human-to-human.

6. Is this the next influenza pandemic?

It is too early to say whether the cases in Mexico and the US will lead to a larger outbreak or could represent the appearance of potential pandemic strain of influenza virus.

There is currently insufficient evidence to understand the extent to which cases in Mexico and the US are firmly linked or to make a complete assessment of the health implications of this new virus.

The Director-General of the World Health Organization (WHO) is the decision maker in terms of declaring an influenza pandemic and elevating the global stages of pandemic alert. Experts from around the world are working in close collaboration with WHO to help determine what risk this situation poses to global public health.

7. Is treatment available?

Testing has shown that the human swine influenza H1N1 is sensitive to can be treated with the antivirals oseltamavir (Tamiflu®) and zanamivir (Relenza®).

8. What measures can I take to prevent infection?

General infection control practices and good respiratory and hand hygiene can help to reduce transmission of all viruses, including the human swine influenza. 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.

9. If someone who has been to the affected areas of Mexico and/or the U.S is feeling sick what should they do?

If you have recently visited one of the countries or areas where human cases of influenza have been identified, it is important for you to monitor your health closely for seven days after your visit to the affected area. There is no need for you to isolate yourself from other people as long as you remain well.

If during this period you develop a feverish illness accompanied by one or more of cough, sore throat, headache and muscle aches, you should contact your GP by phone or seek advice from NHS Direct (0845 4647). You should make sure that you tell those from whom you are seeking advice about your recent travel to an area affected. Depending on your symptoms you may be advised that further investigations may be necessary.

If further investigations are felt to be needed you will be advised on appropriate arrangements for you to be tested. This may include admission to hospital. For most cases however, you will be well enough to remain at home. It is important you avoid contact with other people as much as possible until the results of your tests are back. Your household contacts should also monitor their health and follow the above advice if they get symptoms.

Should you develop symptoms you should follow standard respiratory and hand hygiene and ensure that:

- You avoid contact with other people as much as possible
- You cover your nose and mouth when coughing or sneezing, using a tissue when possible.
Dispose of dirty tissues promptly and carefully.
- Maintain 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.
- Clean hard surfaces (eg door handles) frequently using a normal cleaning product.
- Make sure your children follow this advice.

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