

# Swine Flu

Swine flu (swine influenza) is a type of influenza (flu) that usually affects pigs. It can also be transmitted to humans. It causes flu-like symptoms and a fever and can be treated with an antiviral drug. There is no evidence that using masks helps to reduce the spread of swine flu. People with suspected swine flu should contact their GP or NHS Direct but avoid going to their doctors or the hospital as this will reduce the risk of the infection spreading.

## What is swine flu?

Swine flu is a type of flu. It usually affects pigs but it can also affect humans. The virus can be transmitted from humans to humans. Before Spring 2009, the virus rarely passed from humans to humans. Most cases recently reported have been in Mexico but it has also affected people in other countries, including America, UK, Europe and New Zealand.

A new strain of the swine influenza virus emerged in Mexico in Spring 2009. The World Health Organisation (WHO) announced that this may result in a pandemic. A pandemic occurs when a new strain of influenza virus spreads easily between humans. Influenza pandemics must be taken seriously precisely because of their capacity to spread rapidly to every country in the world. The WHO have stated the the UK is one of the most prepared countries in the world for a pandemic.

## What are the symptoms of swine flu?

The symptoms are similar to symptoms of flu. Symptoms include a sore throat, headache, runny nose, cough, and aches and pains. These symptoms are associated with a fever (high temperature). Some people also have vomiting and diarrhoea. These symptoms usually last for a few days and then completely resolve. Swine flu currently appears to be affecting younger people rather than the elderly.

## What are the possible complications of swine flu?

Initial experience with this virus suggests that most people fully recover. However, complications may occur and they can be serious and life-threatening. The most serious complication is pneumonia which may develop and may be fatal.

## Who is at risk of swine flu?

If you have been in Mexico and certain places in America (for example, Texas, New York or California) in the past seven days and develop flu-like symptoms then you may be at risk of swine flu. You should seek medical advice (see below). Also, if you have been in contact with anyone confirmed to have swine flu.

If you develop flu-like symptoms but have not visited these countries, or visited them over one week ago, and have not been in contact with anyone who has swine flu, then you are unlikely to be at risk of developing swine flu.

Note: you are **not** at risk of swine flu from eating pork. Swine flu is not transmitted by food.

## How can swine flu be prevented?

People with symptoms of flu should stay at home until they feel better. General hygiene is important to reduce the spread of swine flu (and other diseases). This includes:

- Covering your nose and mouth when coughing or sneezing, using a tissue when possible.
- Disposing of tissues promptly.
- Washing your hands frequently with soap and water.
- Cleaning hard surfaces (eg door handles and work surfaces) frequently.
- Ensuring children also follow this advice.

It is thought that the flu vaccine may offer some protection against swine flu. Further tests are currently underway to confirm this. Development of a vaccine for swine flu is likely to take many months.

## What is the treatment of swine flu?

Treatment of swine flu should be at home or, if very ill, in hospital. This will reduce the risk of the virus being transmitted to other people.

Antiviral drugs (eg Tamiflu®) have been shown to be effective for swine flu. They do not kill the virus but interfere with the way the virus multiplies. Therefore, they do not cure influenza, but may reduce the severity and duration of symptoms and may prevent complications. Usually, treatment is given for five days.

As with other flu-like illnesses, paracetamol or ibuprofen will lower your temperature, and also ease aches and pains.

## How is swine flu diagnosed?

If you think you may be at risk of developing swine flu then you should seek medical advice. You should either telephone your GP's surgery or contact NHS Direct. Arrangements will then be made for you to have swabs taken to test for swine flu. The swabs will be delivered to your home or someone can collect them from the surgery.

If you are suspected to have swine flu then you will be given an antiviral drug (eg Tamiflu®) to start straight away. The results of the swab usually take about two days to come through. If the results are normal then the treatment can be stopped. If the results are positive then you need to continue with treatment as directed by your doctor. Unless you become very ill you will be treated at home. This will reduce the risk of the virus spreading to other people.

## Is wearing masks effective to protect from swine flu?

There is no evidence that wearing normal face masks provides any protection from swine flu or other types of influenza. It is not recommended that you wear them.

There are some facts about wearing facemasks that need to be considered, including:

- Wearing a mask may actually give you false reassurance that you are protected from the flu. This may mean that you are less likely to carry out good hand hygiene (washing your hands with soap and water).
- If facemasks are worn, then you need to change them regularly and also dispose of them properly. You need to wash your hands after removing a mask.
- When masks are worn, even for a short period of time, the masks become saturated with your exhaled breath so they become damp and even less effective.
- It has been recommended that facemasks are used for healthcare professionals who are treating people with either suspected or confirmed swine flu. The facemasks for healthcare professionals to wear when treating people with swine flu need to have a special filter. These masks need to be fitted to the face and are very uncomfortable to wear.

## Should I have a supply of Tamiflu® for my family just in case I develop flu?

This is not necessary and is not recommended. The antiviral drugs are only given to people who have flu-like symptoms and have visited one of the high-risk countries in the past seven days. The Department of Health will have enough Tamiflu® to treat 50 million people. Using Tamiflu® when it is not necessary may lead to the virus becoming resistant to this drug. This may mean that Tamiflu® may not work when it is needed to, in people with proven swine flu.

## Further help and advice

### Swine Flu Information Line

Tel: 0800 1 513 513

For the latest advice.

### If you have symptoms that you are concerned about

Contact your GP by phone or contact:

NHS Direct in England - Tel: 0845 4647 Web: [www.nhs.uk](http://www.nhs.uk)

NHS 24 in Scotland - Tel: 08454 24 24 24 Web: [www.nhs24.com](http://www.nhs24.com)

NHS Direct Wales - Tel: 0845 4647 Web: [www.nhsdirect.wales.nhs.uk](http://www.nhsdirect.wales.nhs.uk)

In Northern Ireland - Tel: 0800 0514 142 Web: [www.dhsspsni.gov.uk](http://www.dhsspsni.gov.uk)

### If you are planning to travel abroad

Check the Foreign and Commonwealth Office travel advice at [www.fco.gov.uk/travel](http://www.fco.gov.uk/travel) or call 0845 850 2829

### DirectGov

Web: [www.direct.gov.uk/swineflu](http://www.direct.gov.uk/swineflu)

For information concerning travel, schools and colleges, and the workplace.

## References

- [Swine Influenza](#) - Health Protection Agency UK
- [Swine Influenza](#) - World Health Organisation

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