



Kent Health Protection Unit

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 diarrhoea.

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 have recently visited one of the countries or areas where human cases of swine flu have been identified, or been in close contact with someone who has confirmed or suspected swine flu, it is important for you to monitor your health closely for seven days after your visit or contact.

There is no need for you to isolate yourself from other people as long as you remain well.

If you develop flu-like symptoms, you should stay at home and phone your family doctor or NHS Direct (0845 4647). If a health professional decides that you need to have tests, you should avoid contact with other people as much as possible until you receive the results.

Also make sure you follow the basic hygiene precautions described above.

Treatment

What is the difference between a confirmed and probable case?

A confirmed case of swine flu is one where the person has tested positive for the swine flu virus.

A probable case is a person who is awaiting laboratory confirmation of infection with the swine flu virus.

What is a close contact?

Close contacts are people such as friends and family who have usually been in close and prolonged contact with an individual suffering from an infection.

These people are thought to be more at risk of catching flu. As swine flu is a respiratory virus that can be spread by coughing and sneezing, close contacts may have been put at risk and are followed up and given antiviral medication as a precautionary measure.

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 must either be used as a preventative measure or early in the development of an infection. It should be taken as soon as possible, ideally within 48 hours of the infection starting.

As a precaution, anyone who is being investigated as a possible case of swine flu will be given antiviral medication and will be asked to stay at home and limit their contact with other people until their test results are available.

When is antiviral medication given?

Antiviral medication is given to everyone being investigated as a possible swine flu case. If someone becomes a probable or confirmed case then they will be advised to continue on to take the medication.

It is also offered as a precautionary measure for close contacts who were exposed to a probable or confirmed case of swine flu during the period when the person had symptoms AND the most recent exposure was no more than seven days ago.

Why do suspected cases need to take antiviral medication?

The preventative use of antiviral medication is being used at the moment in an effort to contain the outbreak of swine flu and prevent its spread to the wider population in the UK.

Close contacts of probable or confirmed cases (such as family, friends) are started on antiviral medication as a precautionary measure but can continue their normal lives so long as they do not have any clinical symptoms. If those contacts become ill, they should go home and stay at home and contact their GP by telephone or call NHS Direct.

How will I get antiviral medication if I need it?

People with symptoms and others at risk will be assessed by their GP. If antiviral medication is considered necessary, the GP will contact the HPA, which is coordinating the distribution of antivirals at this stage.

Is there a vaccine to protect against swine flu?

Not yet, because the virus that is circulating is a new strain. A vaccine is currently being developed to immunise people against swine flu but this will take several months to produce.

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.

Dr M Chandrakumar
Director

June 2009