

- *General information and frequently asked questions on Swine influenza or Influenza A*

Updated May 2009

The World Health Organisation has predicted an influenza pandemic and has raised its warning level to five. The latest pandemic scare is caused by the swine influenza. Pandemic flu has the ability to spread rapidly to affect most countries and regions world wide. The symptoms are very similar to those of normal flu and like normal flu there have already been a limited number of deaths as a result of it.

Below are some of the most frequently asked questions about this possible pending pandemic along with answers to them:

What is swine Influenza

Swine influenza, or “swine flu”, is a highly contagious acute respiratory disease caused by the influenza A virus which infects pigs. There are many types, and the infection is constantly changing. Until now it has not normally infected humans, but the latest form clearly does, and can be spread from person to person - probably through coughing and sneezing.

What are the implications for human health?

Outbreaks and sporadic human infection with swine influenza have in the past been reported only occasionally. Generally clinical symptoms are similar to seasonal influenza but reported clinical presentation ranges broadly from asymptomatic infection to severe pneumonia which can be fatal. Mild cases may

have escaped recognition, therefore the true extent of this disease among humans is currently not known as the picture is unfolding everyday.

Where have human cases occurred?

Initially cases in the UK were related to those people who had travelled to Mexico. However, human to human transmission has now occurred in Britain and such cases are expected to increase, if not now then in the Autumn of this year.

How Humans become infected?

Human-to-human transmission has occurred in a number of instances but was limited to close contacts and closed groups of people, primarily to individuals who had recently returned from Mexico where the outbreak was first reported. However cases are now starting to emerge from other countries. . In the UK an increase in the number of confirmed cases have been reported and it is anticipated that this may grow.

Is it safe to eat pork and pork products?

Yes. Swine influenza has not shown it is transmissible to people through eating properly handled and prepared pork (pig meat) or other products derived from pigs. The swine influenza virus is killed by cooking temperatures of **160°F/70°C**, corresponding to the general guidance for the preparation of pork and other meat.

What about the pandemic risk?

If a swine flu virus establishes efficient human-to human transmission, it can cause a pandemic. The impact of a pandemic caused by such a virus is difficult to predict as it depends on the virulence of the virus, existing immunity among people, cross protection by antibodies acquired from seasonal influenza infection and a host of other factors. Swine influenza viruses can give rise to a hybrid virus by mixing with a human influenza virus and can cause a pandemic. The situation is currently being closely monitored and assessed by world health officials. To date it would appear that where swine influenza has affected humans the response to treatment is proving to be effective

Is there a human vaccine to protect against swine influenza?

No. Currently no vaccine for this strain of influenza exists, although scientists are working hard to identify one.

What drugs are available for treatment?

Anti-viral drugs for seasonal influenza. These have so far shown to be effective in the treatment of the illness.

Most of the people who have contracted swine influenza have recovered fully without requiring medical attention or antiviral medicines.

Some influenza viruses develop resistance to the antiviral medicines, limiting the effectiveness of treatment. The viruses obtained from the recent human cases with swine influenza in the United States were sensitive to some drugs and resistant to others. Information is insufficient to make recommendations on the use of the antivirals in prevention and treatment of swine influenza virus infection.

How can I protect myself from getting swine influenza from infected people?

In the past, human infection with swine influenza was generally mild but it has been known to have caused severe illnesses such as pneumonia. For the current outbreak in the United States and Mexico, the clinical picture has been different. None of the confirmed cases in the United States have had the severe form of the disease and patients have recovered with anti viral treatment,.

To protect yourself:

- Avoid close contact with people who appear unwell and present with flu like symptoms e.g. high fever, cough **and/or sore throat**.
- Wash your hands with soap and water frequently and thoroughly. Anti bacterial soaps will help to reduce and kill germs
- Practice good health habits including adequate sleep, eating nutritious food, and keeping physically active. If there is an ill person at home:
- Cover your mouth and nose when caring for the ill person. Masks can be bought commercially or made using the readily available materials as long as they are disposed of or cleaned properly. However, some masks have not been demonstrated to work
- Wash your hands with soap and water thoroughly after each contact with the ill person.
- Try to improve the air flow in the area where the ill person stays. Use doors and windows to take advantage of breezes.
- Keep the environment clean with readily available household cleaning agents.

Ensure that you are up to date with what national and local health authorities are advising.

What should I do if I think I have swine influenza?

Anyone feeling or displaying symptoms should contact their GP or NHS Direct. 0845 4647. Most patients are being treated with anti viral drugs whilst their results are awaited

For more information on the symptoms of swine flu look at the NHS Direct web site <http://www.nhs.uk/Conditions/Pandemic-flu/Pages/Symptoms.aspx>

- Stay at home and keep away from work, school or crowds.
- Rest and take plenty of fluids.

- Cover your mouth and nose with disposable tissues when coughing and sneezing and dispose of the used tissues properly then wash your hands thoroughly.
- Inform family and friends about your illness and seek help for household chores that require contact with other people such as shopping.

If you think you need medical attention:

- Contact your doctor, NHS direct or healthcare provider before travelling to see them and report your symptoms. Explain why you think you have swine influenza (for example, if you have recently travelled to a country where there is a swine influenza outbreak in humans. Follow the advice given
 - You should not attend the GP practice or hospital,
 - You should remain at home, along with other family members until your diagnosis is confirmed.

Take care to cover your nose and mouth if you must travel

What can employers do?

All employers should have a policy in place in the event of a pandemic being declared. If a pandemic occurs employers should encourage workers to stay at home if they develop flu symptoms and consider sending home any member of staff who display flu like symptoms. This precaution should apply to those attending educational and similar establishments e.g. children / students and delegates attending meetings and conferences etc who are coughing and sneezing. In the event that there is flu pandemic the government will be making announcements in the newspapers on the television and radio stations. It may be that normal business is disrupted in order to control the spread of the pandemic

It is important that all employers consider establishing action plans now so that they are prepared or in a position to develop and execute a more detailed plan of action if necessary. The plan must be robust and developed in consultation with safety representatives. Where employees are engaging with the general public they need to be aware of any associated health risks.

The UK government has drawn up an influenza pandemic contingency plan. The plan recognises the extraordinary pressure and demands that are most likely to be placed on health care providers. To view this plan visit:

www.dh.gov.uk/pandemicflu. The information provided has been recently updated. This will continue until there is a clear understanding of the possible pending pandemic.

Although the situation is still unfolding and it is unclear whether the current outbreak in Mexico will develop into a global pandemic, or what form any such pandemic would take, the following TUC guidance, which was produced in 2007 has now been updated (May 2009) and can be found at www.tuc.org.uk/pandemicflu In addition, the Health Protection Agency (HPA) will be producing advice should the situation develop. Guidance from the HSE can be found at the following link <http://www.hse.gov.uk/news/2009/swineflu.htm> Separate advice for health workers will be issued by the Department of Health and can be found on the following link www.dh.gov.uk/pandemicflu

The UK government has been developing a contingency plan for the past five years so we are well placed to managing the situation. We have a stock pile of drugs that will be made available for 33 million people - however the best advice is to ensure that employers and employees follow best practice and keep abreast of developments.