



Swine flu alert - your questions answered

In recent days, authorities from the WHO (World Health Organisation) have warned that a new strain of influenza has 'pandemic potential'. The new strain of swine flu is suspected in the deaths of over 100 people in Mexico (with around 2000 probable cases). Infections have also been confirmed elsewhere around the globe, including the USA, Canada, Europe, Israel and New Zealand. There are currently no cases confirmed in Australia, however several individuals who have exhibited flu-like symptoms are in the process of being tested.



It should be noted that at this stage, there is no real need to be alarmed. Australian Medical Association President, Dr Rosanna Capolingua, says 'We know that many of the people who have contracted the virus in Mexico and the US have only mild symptoms.'

The following information has been adapted from a statement issued by the WHO and information from the US Centres for Disease Control (CDC), and answers some of the more common questions regarding swine flu.

What is swine flu?

Swine Influenza (swine flu) is a highly contagious respiratory disease of pigs caused by type A influenza viruses. Sometimes pigs can be infected with more than one virus at a time, allowing the genes from different viruses to mix and resulting in a new strain of virus.

People do not normally get swine flu, but human infections can and do happen. Swine flu viruses have been reported to spread from person-to-person, but in the past, this transmission was limited and not sustained beyond three people.

How is this swine flu virus different?

The CDC has determined that this swine influenza A (H1N1) virus is contagious and is spreading from human to human. However, at this time, it is not known how easily the virus spreads between people.

The A/H1N1 swine flu confirmed in the Mexican, U.S. and Canadian cases is a previously unknown combination of pig, human and avian flu viruses. Pigs, which are easily infected with all three types of flu, can function as 'mixing vessels' in which flu viruses exchange genetic material and emerge in new forms.

How does swine flu spread?

Spread of this swine influenza A (H1N1) virus is thought to be happening in the same way that seasonal flu spreads. Flu viruses are spread mainly from person to person through coughing or sneezing of people with influenza. Sometimes people may become infected by touching something with flu viruses on it and then touching their mouth or nose.

Infected people may be able to infect others beginning 1 day before

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symptoms develop and up to 7 or more days after becoming sick. Children, especially younger children, might potentially be contagious for longer periods.

What are the signs and symptoms of swine flu in people?

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

- Fever
- Cough
- Sore throat
- Body aches
- Headache
- Chills
- Fatigue

Some people have also reported diarrhea and vomiting associated with swine flu. In the past, severe illness (pneumonia and respiratory failure) and deaths have been reported with swine flu infection in people. Like seasonal flu, swine flu may cause a worsening of underlying chronic medical conditions.

What should I do to keep from getting the flu?

First and most important: wash your hands well and often. Try to stay in good general health. Get plenty of sleep, be physically active, manage your stress, drink plenty of fluids, and eat nutritious food. Try not touch surfaces that may be contaminated with the flu virus. Avoid close contact with people who are sick.

The CDC recommends you take these everyday steps to protect your health:

- Cover your nose and mouth with a tissue when you cough or sneeze. Throw the tissue in the bin after you use it.
- Wash your hands often with soap and water, especially after you cough or sneeze. Alcohol-based hand cleaners are also effective.
- Avoid touching your eyes, nose or mouth. Germs spread this way.
- Try to avoid close contact with sick people.
- If you get sick with influenza, stay home from work or school and limit contact with others to keep from infecting them.

Are there medicines to treat swine flu?

There is no vaccine available right now to protect against swine flu and it is not known whether current human seasonal influenza vaccines can provide any protection as influenza viruses change very quickly.

The WHO and CDC recommends the use of drugs such as TamiFlu and Relenza for the treatment and/or prevention of infection as the virus has proved sensitive to these drugs. However most of the previously reported swine influenza cases recovered fully from the disease without requiring medical attention and without antiviral medicines.

Antiviral drugs are prescription medicines (pills, liquid or an inhaler) that fight against the flu by keeping flu viruses from reproducing in your body. If you get sick, antiviral drugs can make your illness milder and make you feel better faster. They may also prevent serious flu complications. For treatment, antiviral drugs work best if started soon after getting sick (within 2 days of symptoms).



What should I do if I get sick?

If you live in areas where swine influenza cases have been identified and become ill with influenza-like symptoms, you may want to contact your health care provider, particularly if you are worried about your symptoms. Your health care provider will determine whether influenza testing or treatment is needed.

If you are sick, you should stay home and avoid contact with other people as much as possible to keep from spreading your illness to others.

If you become ill and experience any of the following warning signs, seek emergency medical care.

In children emergency warning signs that need urgent medical attention include:

- Fast breathing or trouble breathing
- Bluish skin color
- Not drinking enough fluids
- Not waking up or not interacting
- Being so irritable that the child does not want to be held
- Flu-like symptoms improve but then return with fever and worse cough
- Fever with a rash

In adults, emergency warning signs that need urgent medical attention include:

- Difficulty breathing or shortness of breath
- Pain or pressure in the chest or abdomen
- Sudden dizziness
- Confusion
- Severe or persistent vomiting

Can I get swine influenza from eating or preparing pork?

No. Swine influenza viruses are not spread by food. 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.

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