



Protecting people
Preventing harm
Preparing for threats

Swine influenza cases: Questions & Answers

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.

If someone who has been to affected areas is feeling sick what should they do?

Anyone who has recently traveled to the affected areas and is experiencing influenza-like illness should stay at home to limit contact with others, and seek medical advice from a local health professional or by contacting NHS Direct.

Is treatment available?

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

Most of the previously reported swine influenza cases recovered fully from the disease without requiring medical attention and without antiviral medicines.

Is this swine flu virus contagious?

It has been determined that this virus is contagious and it spreads between people, although it is not known how easily.

How common are cases of swine influenza?

Cases of swine influenza in humans usually occur after direct or close contact with infected pigs. The person-to-person transmission that is being investigated in Mexico has been previously reported but appears to be rare.

Infection with swine influenza virus has been detected occasionally in humans since the 1950s. There have been no cases of swine influenza identified in people in the UK for at least ten years. Through the regular seasonal influenza surveillance that is done in Europe, a single case with mild symptoms was reported in November 2008 in Spain. 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.

What measures can I take to protect against infection?

General infection control practices and good respiratory 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

What level of alert have we reached and what does this mean?

The World Health Organization (WHO) raised its pandemic alert level to Phase 5 on Tuesday 29 April 2009. The Director-General of WHO is the decision maker in terms of 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.

The current phase 5 is characterised by 'human-to-human spread of the virus into at least two countries in one WHO region. While most countries will not be affected at this stage, the declaration of Phase 5 is a strong signal that pandemic is imminent and that the time to finalise the organisation, communication and implementation of the planned mitigation measures is short'.

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, bird 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.

People will not get swine flu from eating pork or pork products

It is important to stress that swine influenza viruses are not transmitted by food. There is no risk of catching the illness from eating properly handled and cooked pork or pork products.