

Swine Flu FAQ

The swine flu virus in the U.S. is the same one causing a deadly epidemic in Mexico. What is swine flu? What can we do about it?

What Is Swine Flu?

Like humans, pigs get the flu. Four different type A swine flu strains commonly circulate among pigs. Most recent swine flu viruses have belonged to the H1N1 and H3N2 subtypes. Pigs typically get sick but usually don't die from swine flu.

The new swine flu virus infecting humans is very unusual. It's somehow acquired genes from swine, bird, and human flu bugs. And it's also got genes from Eurasian swine flu viruses that aren't supposed to be in North America.

Do Humans Get Swine Flu?

Normally, swine flu bugs don't infect people. Historically, there's a case every year or two in the U.S. among people who have contact with live pigs. But from December 2005 to January 2009 there was an uptick in swine flu cases. There were 12 human swine flu infections during this time. Eleven of these people had direct or indirect contact with pigs; in the twelfth case it was not known whether there was pig contact.

It's possible this uptick was due to improved reporting systems, but the CDC says "genetic changes in swine flu viruses and other factors might also be a factor."

The new swine flu virus is different. It's not yet clear that it's here to stay. But it is infecting humans, and that has world health officials keeping a close eye on it.

What Are the Symptoms of Swine Flu?

Swine flu symptoms are similar to regular flu symptoms and include cough, sore throat, fever, chills, headache, and fatigue. Some patients have also reported nausea and diarrhea. There is no easy way to distinguish swine flu from other types of flu or other germs. It takes a lab test to tell whether it's swine flu.

Can Swine Flu Spread From Person to Person?

The U.S. residents infected with swine flu virus had no direct contact with pigs. The CDC says it's likely that the infections represent widely separated cycles of human-to-human infections.

Have There Been Previous Swine Flu Outbreaks?

If swine flu sounds familiar to you, it's probably because you remember or have read about the 1976 swine flu outbreak at Fort Dix, N.J., among military recruits. It lasted about a month and then went away as mysteriously as it appeared. As many as 240 people were infected; one died. The swine flu that spread at Fort Dix was the H1N1 strain. That's the same flu strain that caused the disastrous flu pandemic of 1918-1919, resulting in tens of millions of deaths.



Concern that a new H1N1 pandemic might return with winter led to a crash program to create a vaccine and vaccinate all Americans against swine flu. That vaccine program ran into all kinds of problems -- not the least of which was public perception that the vaccine caused excessive rates of dangerous reactions. After more than 40 million people were vaccinated, the effort was abandoned.

As it turned out, there was no swine flu epidemic.

I Got a Flu Shot. Am I Protected Against Swine Flu?

No. There is currently no swine flu vaccine.

It's possible that the seasonal flu vaccine might provide partial protection against H3N2 swine flu bugs. But the strain that appeared in California is the H1N1 swine flu strain. It is very different from the H1N1 human flu strain included in the seasonal flu vaccine.

It's not known whether previous infection with human type A H1N1 flu might provide partial protection against the type A H1N1 swine flu in the current outbreak. However, the CDC has made a "vaccine seed" from swine flu isolated from an infected person, and has begun the process of developing a vaccine should the need arise. Whether a vaccine could be produced in quantity by next flu season is a huge question.

How Serious Is the Public Health Threat of a Swine Flu Epidemic?

Any flu epidemic is worrisome, especially when a new strain of flu bug is involved. "Influenza A viruses new to the human population that are able to efficiently transmit from person to person and cause illness may represent a pandemic threat," the CDC warns.

It's worrisome that, unlike seasonal flu, the swine flu outbreak in Mexico is attacking healthy young people. That's a hallmark of pandemic flu bugs. But it takes more than a new virus spreading among humans to make a pandemic. The virus has to be able to spread efficiently from one person to another, and transmission has to be sustained over time. In addition, the virus has to spread geographically.

Is There a Treatment for Swine Flu?

Yes. While the swine flu bug is resistant to older flu medicines, it remains sensitive to Tamiflu and to Relenza.

Can You Get Swine Flu by Eating Pork?

No. You can only catch swine flu from being around an infected pig -- or, if it's the new swine flu virus, from an infected person.

Swine Flu and Travel: What Should You Do?

Should You Stay Home?

What If You Get Sick While Traveling?

Find Out What to Do

Are you rethinking your travel plans in light of swine flu? Here are travel recommendations to keep in mind.

The CDC recommends that U.S. travelers avoid all non-essential travel to Mexico. So does New Zealand's Ministry of Health -- New Zealand has had swine flu cases in college students who recently visited Mexico.

But the World Health Organization (WHO) has not recommended travel restrictions to Mexico or any other countries, because those measures may not be effective in stopping the spread of the virus, says Keiji Fukuda, MD, assistant director-general for health security and environment at the WHO.

Individual countries are free to set their own travel policies and to handle swine flu as they see fit. No one is going to stop you from getting on a plane, train, ship, or car. However there are steps that you can take to limit your swine flu risk.



Here is what the CDC wants you to do if you must travel to an area that has reported cases of swine flu:

- Check updates from the CDC, WHO, and local health authorities, and follow their guidelines.
- Before traveling, people in high-risk groups -- such as the elderly and people with chronic conditions such as diabetes, lung disease, or heart disease -- should get the prescription antiviral medications Tamiflu or Relenza to take while traveling in areas that have reported cases of swine flu.
- Check on health care resources in the area you'll be visiting before you depart.
- While you're in an area with reported swine flu cases, wash your hands often with soap and water, or if soap isn't available, use an alcohol-based hand gel.
- Avoid touching your eyes, nose, or mouth.
- Try to avoid close contact with sick people.
- If you get sick while traveling, cover your mouth and nose with a tissue when you sneeze or cough, and throw the tissue in the trash afterward.
- Seek medical care if you are ill with a fever and other symptoms of swine flu, especially if you think you may have had contact with someone with swine flu or severe respiratory illness in the seven days before you got sick.
- If you're sick, don't travel, except to get local medical care. Try to limit contact with other people, so your germs don't spread.

Once you get home from an area with reported swine flu cases, the CDC asks that you closely monitor your health for seven days. If you get sick during that time, call your doctor or clinic for an appointment. And when you arrive for your appointment, tell your doctor your symptoms, where you traveled, and if you had close contact with someone infected with swine flu.

Swine Flu Q&A: What Parents Need to Know

"How do I protect my child?" That's the No. 1 question parents have when it comes to swine flu.

To help guide parents, experts answer these common questions about swine flu. Are some children more at risk than others? Should you take your kids out of school if there are cases of swine flu in your town? What are the symptoms of swine flu in children?



Influenza is very different from the common cold. Classically, with influenza, children have sudden onset of significant fever with respiratory symptoms. High fever, chills. Older children will complain of headache, scratchy sore throat, and muscle aches. Children will develop a nasal congestion and cough.

What should parents do to protect their children from the swine flu?

Be vigilant, and watch your children closely. Follow the usual recommended procedures for reducing risk of transmission of infection. That means frequent hand-washing. Avoid large crowds. Avoid direct contact with sick individuals. If sick, children should stay home.

What if you're out, at work, or at a playground?

If you are out in public and someone has a cough, you should stay away from that individual. And people should cover their mouth and nose when they cough or sneeze.

What advice for parents with children in school?

Based on finding of the virus in a certain areas, authorities may close day care centers and public events. But parents should not take children out of day care or school unless the public health authorities have recommended such a step.

In situations like this, sometimes mass hysteria sets in and people overreact. What can be done about this?

Just be aware of what's going on in your area. You are always going to get some people who will become hysterical, withdraw their kids from school. But that is not necessary at this point. Follow recommendations of public health authorities. This is where leadership is very important. Leaders should let people know that this is serious, but not to overreact, and do what they should do, based on public health recommendations.

What if your child gets sick? What are symptoms of swine flu in children?

What should parents do if their child has flu-like symptoms?

If a child has mild illness, or something that looks like the flu, with fever and chills, headache, body ache, coughing, sore throat, they should definitely stay home from school or day care. They should continue taking Tylenol and Motrin for fever. Parents should encourage hydration.

Are there signs parents should watch for?

Parents should monitor closely for any signs that children are getting worse, if they have any difficulty breathing, if they are not able to drink, or are not urinating well, if they are very irritable even after their fever goes down, if they have any sort of rash, or if the fever goes down and flu symptoms get better, then get worse again.

What can a child's temperature tell us about whether they need to see a doctor?

Any child less than the age of 2 or 3 months should definitely always be checked out with a fever. If a child has symptoms over age 2, they don't necessarily need to come in. If the child has other medical problems, such as having a heart condition, a lung condition, bad asthma, even if those children just have mild symptoms, they probably should be brought in.

What swine flu treatments are available for children?

This virus is susceptible to antiviral medication like Tamiflu and Relenza. Those drugs are in adequate supply. Tamiflu, if given within 48 hours of onset, will shorten the course. Its use depends on prompt diagnosis and treatment. Early treatment with Tamiflu is remarkable. Relenza is not for young children. In response to swine flu, the FDA is now allowing the use of Tamiflu for children younger than 1 to treat and prevent influenza.

Is swine flu easier to detect in young children and teens?

Yes. An infant can't describe his symptoms and may have more nonspecific symptoms.

Is flu more dangerous for very young children?

Yes. Children under 2 have a higher risk of complications. Seasonal influenza is associated with a significant risk of hospitalization in children 2 and under. Children under 2 have a similar hospitalization rate similar to adults over 65.

Are some children more at risk of getting very sick?

Yes. Children who have an underlying disorder, including asthma, diabetes, another metabolic disease, children with chronic kidney disease, sickle cell disease.

What can you do for your children if they do get the flu?

Children with influenza should not get any product that contains aspirin. Make sure it's not in any medicines they are given. Tylenol, ibuprofen compounds are fine.

What about the flu shot? Can it protect you from swine flu?

The vaccine now available is not expected to offer any protection against the swine influenza.

To help guide parents, the CDC has posted tips on caring for a child with flu-like symptoms:

- Keep the child at home. Don't let him go to school or day care for 10 days after the onset of symptoms.
- Keep the sick child away from other people as much as possible.
- If the child has underlying health problems, see a doctor when symptoms start.
- If the child is otherwise healthy, call a doctor to see if an appointment is needed.
- When holding small children who are sick, place their chin on your shoulder so that they will not cough in your face.
- If the child has severe symptoms, has been to an area where there have been cases of swine flu, or been directly exposed to a swine flu patient, see a doctor.
- Wash your hands with soap and water often, or use an alcohol-based hand gel if soap is not available.
- Keep surfaces (including toys and bedside tables) clean -- wipe them down with a household disinfectant.
- Wash bed sheets and towels with laundry detergent in hot water. Avoid "hugging" the dirty laundry on the way to the washing machine, and wash your hands right after handling dirty laundry.

H1N1 Flu (Swine Flu)

Novel H1N1 Flu in Humans

Are there human infections with this H1N1 virus in China?

Yes. There have been confirmed cases of H1N1 virus in China.

Is this new H1N1 virus contagious?

CDC has determined that this new 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.

What are the signs and symptoms?

The symptoms of this new H1N1 flu virus in people are similar to the symptoms of seasonal flu and include fever, cough, sore throat, runny or stuffy nose, body aches, headache, chills and fatigue. A significant number of people who have been infected with this virus also have reported diarrhea and vomiting. Also, like seasonal flu, severe illnesses and death has occurred as a result of illness associated with this virus.



How severe is illness associated with this novel H1N1 flu virus?

It's not known at this time how severe this new H1N1 flu virus will be in the general population. In seasonal flu, there are certain people that are at higher risk of serious flu-related complications. This includes people 65 years and older, children younger than five years old, pregnant women, and people of any age with certain chronic medical conditions. Early indications are that pregnancy and other previously recognized medical conditions that increase the risk of influenza-related complications, like asthma and diabetes, also appear to be associated with increased risk of complications from this novel H1N1 virus infection as well.

How does novel H1N1 flu compare to seasonal flu in terms of its severity and infection rates?

At this time, there is not enough information to predict how severe this novel H1N1 flu outbreak will be in terms of illness and death or how it will compare with seasonal influenza.

With seasonal flu, we know that seasons vary in terms of timing, duration and severity. Seasonal influenza can cause mild to severe illness, and at times can lead to death.

So far, with novel H1N1 flu, the largest number of novel H1N1 flu confirmed and probable cases have occurred in people between the ages of 5 and 24-years-old. At this time, there are few cases and no deaths reported in people older than 64 years old, which is unusual compared with seasonal flu. However, pregnancy and other previously recognized high risk medical conditions from seasonal influenza appear to be associated with increased risk of complications from this novel H1N1.

How does this new H1N1 virus spread?

Spread of this 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 by people with influenza. Sometimes people may become infected by touching something with flu viruses on it and then touching their mouth or nose.

How long can an infected person spread this virus to others?

At the current time, CDC believes that this virus has the same properties in terms of spread as seasonal flu viruses. With seasonal flu, studies have shown that people may be contagious from one day before they develop symptoms to up to 7 days after they get sick. Children, especially younger children, might potentially be contagious for longer periods.

Prevention & Treatment

What can I do to protect myself from getting sick?

There is no vaccine available right now to protect against this new H1N1 virus. There are everyday actions that can help prevent the spread of germs that cause respiratory illnesses like influenza.

Take these everyday steps:

- Cover your nose and mouth with a tissue when you cough or sneeze. Throw the tissue in the trash 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.
- Stay home if you are sick for 7 days after your symptoms begin or until you have been symptom-free for 24 hours, whichever is longer. This is to keep from infecting others and spreading the virus further.

Other important actions you can take are:

- Follow public health advice regarding school closures, avoiding crowds and other social distancing measures.
- Be prepared in case you get sick and need to stay home for a week or so; a supply of over-the-counter medicines, alcohol-based hand rubs, tissues and other related items might could be useful and help avoid the need to make trips out in public while you are sick and contagious.

What is the best way to keep from spreading the virus through coughing or sneezing?

If you are sick, limit your contact with other people as much as possible. If you are sick, stay home for 7 days after your symptoms begin or until you have been symptom-free for 24 hours, whichever is longer. Cover your mouth and nose with a tissue when coughing or sneezing. Put your used tissue in the waste basket. Then, clean your hands, and do so every time you cough or sneeze.

What is the best technique for washing my hands to avoid getting the flu?

Washing your hands often will help protect you from germs. Wash with soap and water or clean with alcohol-based hand cleaner. CDC recommends that when you wash your hands - with soap and warm water - that you wash for 15 to 20 seconds. When soap and water are not available, alcohol-based disposable hand wipes or gel sanitizers may be used. You can find them in most supermarkets and drugstores. If using gel, rub your hands until the gel is dry. The gel doesn't need water to work; the alcohol in it kills the germs on your hands.

What should I do if I get sick?

If you live in areas where people have been identified with new H1N1 flu and become ill with influenza-symptoms, including fever, body aches, runny or stuffy nose, sore throat, nausea, or vomiting or diarrhea, you should stay home and avoid contact with other people. Staying at home means that you should not leave your home except to seek medical care. This means avoiding normal activities, including work, school, travel, shopping, social events, and public gatherings.

If you have severe illness or you are at high risk for flu complications, contact your health care provider or seek medical care. Your health care provider will determine whether flu testing or treatment is needed.

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 or gray skin color
- Not drinking enough fluids
- Severe or persistent vomiting
- 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

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
- Flu-like symptoms improve but then return with fever and worse cough

Are there medicines to treat infection with this new virus?

Yes. CDC recommends the use of oseltamivir (brand name Tamiflu) or zanamivir (brand name Relenza) for the treatment and/or prevention of infection with the new H1N1 flu virus. 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. During the current outbreak, the priority use for influenza antiviral drugs during is to treat severe influenza illness.

