

H1N1 flu and you

Patient information leaflet

The H1N1 virus (initially referred to as “swine flu”) is a new influenza virus causing people to become ill. It was first detected in humans in April 2009 in the United States. Other countries, including Mexico and Canada, have since reported people sick with the virus. The virus is spreading from person to person, probably in much the same way that regular seasonal influenza viruses spread.

In this leaflet we will attempt to answer some important questions for you.

Why is this new H1N1 virus sometimes called “swine ‘flu”?

This virus was originally referred to as “swine ‘flu” because laboratory tests showed that many of the genes in this new virus were very similar to influenza viruses that normally occur in pigs in North America. However, further studies have shown that the new virus is very different from that normally found in North American pigs. It has two genes from flu viruses normally found in pigs in Europe and Asia, but also has an avian and human gene component. Scientists call this a “quadruple reassortant” virus.

Is this new H1N1 virus contagious?

It has been determined that the 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 of this virus in people?

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

Can I become infected with this new H1N1 virus from eating or preparing pork?

No. H1N1 viruses are not spread by food. You therefore cannot get this new H1N1 virus from eating pork or pork products. Eating properly handled and cooked pork products is safe.

What should I do to keep from getting the flu?

Firstly and most importantly: wash your hands. 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 to touch surfaces that may be contaminated with the flu virus. Avoid close contact with people who are sick.

Are there medicines to treat infection with this new virus?

Yes. The South African National Institute for Communicable Diseases (NICD) recommends the use of oseltamivir or zanamivir for the treatment and/or prevention of infection with these new influenza A (H1N1) viruses. 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.

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

At the current time, NICD 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 seven days after they get sick. Children, especially younger children, might potentially be contagious for longer periods.

What surfaces are most likely to be sources of contamination?

Germs can be spread when a person touches something that is contaminated with germs and then touches his or her eyes, nose, or mouth. Droplets from a cough or sneeze of an infected person move through the air. Germs can be spread when a person touches respiratory droplets from another person on a surface like a desk, for example, and then touches their own eyes, mouth or nose before washing their hands.

What can I do to protect myself from getting sick?

There is no vaccine available right now to protect against this new H1N1 virus. However, you can take these everyday steps to protect your health:

- Cover your nose and mouth with a tissue when you cough or sneeze, and then throw the used tissue in the wastepaper basket.
- Wash your hands often with soap and water, especially after you have coughed or sneezed. 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 are sick, stay home for seven days after your symptoms begin or until you have been symptom-free for 24 hours, whichever is longer. This is to keep you from infecting others and spreading the virus further.

Other important actions that you can take are:

Be prepared in case you become ill 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 be useful and help avoid the need to make trips out in public while you are sick and contagious.

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 your hands with soap and water or use an alcohol-based hand cleaner. We recommend that you wash your hands for 15 to 20 seconds when using soap and warm water. 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 pharmacies. 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 H1N1 influenza cases have been identified and you become ill with influenza-like symptoms, including fever, body aches, runny nose, sore throat, nausea, or vomiting or diarrhea, you should contact your general practitioner, particularly if you are worried about your symptoms. Your doctor 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 avoid spreading your illness to others.

If your child becomes ill and experiences any of the following symptoms, seek emergency medical care:

- Fast breathing or difficulty in breathing
- Bluish or gray skin color
- Not drinking enough fluids
- Difficult to wake 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 indicate 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.

Remember to have your flu shot to protect you from the normal seasonal winter flu!

Adapted by Dr Pete Vincent, Netcare Travel Clinics, for South African use from a leaflet prepared by the Center for Disease Control in the USA (CDC).