

What is H1N1 Flu (Swine flu)?

"Swine Flu" is shorthand for influenza viruses that contain genetic components from swine as well as from typical human influenza viruses (the current swine flu virus has 5 of 8 major genetic components originating from swine). Typical influenza viruses in swine do not normally cause disease that infects humans, although sporadic cases do occur, usually in people who have had close contact with pigs. This current "swine flu" virus, however, does support transmission from human to human and has, therefore, caused a significant number of human flu cases.

How contagious is H1N1 flu?

This current "swine flu" appears to be transmitted from human to human slightly more easily than typical seasonal influenza.

How widespread are the infections with H1N1 flu?

Infections are now world-wide, meeting most criteria for "pandemic" in terms of spread, but, so far at least, the disease caused is relatively mild except in high-risk persons (see *Who is at high risk for flu complications?*)

Why should I be concerned about H1N1 flu?

Most people should not be overly worried about this flu. The biggest concern is that this flu is relatively easily transmitted from person to person, which raises the chance that people who are at high risk could be exposed. That is a reason that everyone should make efforts to decrease the spread of flu (see *How can I prevent H1N1 flu?*)

Who is at high risk for flu complications?

As noted, this current H1N1 (swine) flu most commonly causes a relatively mild illness. Certain populations, however, are at higher risk for complications from the infection. These groups include those over 65 years of age, the very young (under 5 years, especially those under 2 years), pregnant women, people with chronic medical conditions, and people in long term care situations.

What are the symptoms of H1N1 (swine) flu?

Clinical symptoms generally are similar to seasonal influenza. Infected individuals report:

- fever
- cough
- sore throat
- muscle aches, headache
- rapid onset of breathing problems
- other possible symptoms: diarrhea and vomiting

What is the difference between flu and a cold?

- Flu symptoms are usually more severe than cold symptoms and can affect the whole body. Flu usually starts suddenly with high fever, chills, severe body aches, extreme tiredness, headache, and dry cough. A person with the flu is contagious for 24 to 48 hours before becoming sick and for 4 to 7 days after becoming sick (typically, until symptoms have resolved). Children can be infectious longer, sometimes up to 3 weeks, but they are most infectious for 10 to 14 days.

- Colds are generally milder than flu and usually affect just the nose and throat. Colds begin slowly with a sore or scratchy throat, sneezing, and runny or stuffy nose; a mild cough develops a few days later. Fever is rare in adults and older children, and extreme tiredness is not a cold symptom.

How can I prevent H1N1 flu?

Personal health practices

- Hand washing is the single most effective way to prevent spread of infections.
 - Wash your hands frequently with soap and water. Use waterless sanitizing gel or lotion if soap and water are unavailable.
 - Wash your hands after sneezing, coughing, blowing your nose, or using any shared keyboards, phones, or tools.
 - Wash your hands before and after touching your face, mouth, or nose, and before eating.
 - Wash your hands after contact with any ill person.
- Cover your mouth and nose with a tissue when you cough or sneeze. Immediately discard the tissue in a trash receptacle
- Keep your distance — at least 3 to 6 feet — from people who are ill, coughing, or sneezing.
- Get a regular seasonal flu shot if available. This will not prevent swine flu, but it can decrease the chance of confusing regular seasonal flu with swine flu.
- In a pandemic, avoid crowds and public transport.

Vaccines: There are no human H1N1 flu (swine flu) vaccines available yet. It is possible that vaccines could be available beginning sometime this fall.

Antiviral medications: Prescription antiviral drugs (oseltamivir or zanamivir) can help prevent the disease if you have been exposed. Only high-risk persons (see *Who is at high risk for flu complications?*) and certain health care workers or first responders should use the medications for preventing the flu after a close exposure to a person with the current H1N1 flu.

How can I prepare at home?

Even though this flu event does not appear to be serious or have the potential for economic disruption, it does remind us that a serious event could happen with little notice. Consequently, all homes should use this as an opportunity to address "All-Hazards Preparedness" by ensuring they have the following on hand as all times.

- cough and congestion supplies: tissues, surgical masks, decongestants, cough suppressants, fever medication
- hand sanitizers (see *What is the best hand sanitizer?*)
- food and water to last for 3 days or more. Some authorities recommend 10 to 15 days to prepare for a virulent biological event.
- flashlight and batteries
- reliable thermometer for humans
- clean water supply or home purification system
- sufficient cash (if banks, ATMs are unavailable)
- key documents and ID (passport, government issued IDs, health records, health insurance papers)
- medical supplies including prescription medicines
- pet food

How do I stay healthy at work during a flu outbreak?

- Wash hands frequently. (See: *How can I prevent swine flu?*)
- Use disinfecting wipes to clean common surfaces (keyboards, phones, door handles) or use gloves.
- Stay at least 3-6 feet from people who are sneezing or coughing.
- Masks are minimally effective for preventing catching airborne diseases, but can be very effective when worn by a sick person in decreasing droplet spread to others.
- Cancel non-essential and face-to-face meetings (only if in a known affected area).
- Know who to contact and how (phone, email, hotline) if you have questions about whether you should come to work.

Is it O.K. to travel?

YES! The basic precautions listed above under “*How can I prevent H1N1 flu?*” should be carefully followed, especially during airplane travel.

- On airplanes, it is the shared “surfaces” (such as shared magazines, restroom surfaces, etc.) that are most likely a bigger risk than airborne infection, so hand washing and hand sanitizers are very important.
- For international travel, your physician may recommend that you carry a “stand-by” treatment course of an antiviral medication.
- Note: If you are traveling to an area where malaria is present, remember that initial symptoms of malaria are similar to those of flu. If you do travel to such an area and develop an illness with fever, ensure you seek care immediately and ensure that your healthcare provider knows that you traveled to a malaria area.

What if I become ill?

- People who are not at high risk (see *Who is at high risk for flu complications?*)
 - Stay home and treat the symptoms with over-the-counter “cold” products.
 - It is usually not necessary to see a health care provider or to get tested for H1N1.
 - Do not go to a health care facility without contacting them first.
 - DO contact a health care provider if the sick person
 - has difficulty breathing or chest pain
 - has purple or blue discoloration of the lips
 - is vomiting and unable to keep liquids down
 - has signs of dehydration such as dizziness when standing, absence of urination, or in infants, a lack of tears when they cry
 - has seizures (for example, uncontrolled convulsions)
 - is less responsive than normal or becomes confused
- People who are at high risk (see *Who is at high risk for flu complications?*) should contact a health care provider if they develop a fever plus any of the following symptoms that may be consistent with this flu:
 - congestion or trouble breathing
 - cough
 - sore throat
(joint aches, muscle aches, or weakness/fatigue are often associated with flu, but are not part of the standard criteria)
- Again, it is very important that you contact your health care provider before going to the clinic or hospital. Describe your symptoms and any possible exposure to sick people or animals, or travel to H1N1 flu-infected areas.
- Notify your supervisor.
 - Do NOT go to work if you develop these symptoms.
 - Do NOT go to work if you have been exposed to someone with flu-like illness until the 4th day after the exposure, unless you are cleared by your healthcare provider.

- There are antiviral medications that can be used to treat H1N1 (swine) flu. For non-high risk persons, however, use of antivirals only decreases the course of the disease by 1 to 2 days, so antiviral treatment is not considered essential, since the disease is relatively mild in most people. For those who are at high risk (see *Who is at high risk for flu complications?*), treatment should be initiated as soon as possible after symptoms begin. The drug can be started at any time during the illness but works best when started within 48 hours of becoming ill.

What if I become ill at work?

- Call your supervisor (do not meet in person) and report your symptoms.
- Stay away from other people, staff, and visitors.
- Put on a mask if instructed to do so.
- Go home if so instructed.
- Follow the guidance above, "*What if I become ill?*"

When can I return to work?

- If you have had a flu-like illness, you can usually return to work once you have fully recovered OR are on effective antiviral medication with symptoms improving and cleared by your healthcare provider.
- If you were closely exposed to someone with flu-like illness, you may return to work on the 4th day after the last exposure, if you have not gotten sick. Local policies or guidelines may affect this. The duration may be less if you are taking antiviral medication

What is the best hand sanitizer?

- The CDC recommends the use of alcohol-based hand sanitizers. A common brand is Purell, although there are many generic brands available. Repetitive use of alcohol-based hand sanitizers without frequent hand washing is not recommended because the gel base can leave a film that may trap dirt and organisms.
- There are alternative waterless hand-sanitizers, such as Microsanrx[®] (chloroxylenol based lotion or benzalkonium/nonoxynol-9 based foam) that have some extended (minutes to hours) antibacterial effect and have passed European efficacy testing (EN12054, EN1500) for topical hand disinfection.