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Swine Flu and the H1N1 Influenza Virus Pandemic

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What is Swine Flu?

Swine Influenza or swine flu is a contagious respiratory disease of pigs, caused by a type A influenza virus. Type A influenza viruses can affect a range of other animals and humans. Like all influenza viruses, swine flu viruses change or mutate constantly. Over the years, different variants of swine flu viruses have emerged, and at this time, 4 main influenza type A virus subtypes have been identified in pigs (H1N1, H1N2, H3N2 and H3N1). An H1N1 subtype is causing the current outbreak. Swine flu is commonly seen in North America, South America, Asia, and Europe.

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What is a Pandemic?

Pandemic influenza is defined as a new influenza virus that spreads easily between humans and affects a wide geographic area. However, just because the disease is classified as a pandemic, it does not necessarily mean that it causes more severe disease. As of April 29th, the World Health Organization has verified human-to-human transmission of swine flu, and has raised its pandemic alert level to Phase 5. A Phase 5 alert is a "strong signal that a pandemic is imminent and that the time to finalize the organization, communication, and implementation of the planned mitigation measures is short."

If this is a flu of pigs, why are humans getting it?

Human cases of swine flu have to date been uncommon and usually involve people who have close contact with pigs. The current outbreak of H1N1 swine influenza began in Mexico and is spreading by contact between people. Confirmed cases have been found in Mexico, the United States, Canada, Spain, and

Scotland. These cases involve a new strain of the H1N1 subtype. Genetic testing shows that this strain is related to swine influenza virus strains but also contains genetic material from human and avian influenza strains. Because this is a new strain, people and animals will have no natural immunity, so the virus can spread rapidly. As of May 1st, 2009, authorities are recommending that the current outbreak be referred to as The H1N1 Influenza.

What are the symptoms in people?

Swine flu has the same symptoms as regular human seasonal flu, with a mild and short-lived illness. Symptoms are similar in humans and animals and generally include fever, fatigue, loss of appetite, sore throat, coughing, sneezing, runny nose and congestion; occasionally, the patient may develop vomiting and diarrhea. The disease rarely leads to death.

How is Swine Flu spread?

Like most respiratory viruses, swine flu is contagious and spreads via direct contact with an infected patient or by touching objects that have been contaminated by discharges from a sneezing or coughing patient.

Can one catch it from pork products?

No. There is no evidence that this particular viral strain is in swine or that touching uncooked pork could infect you. As a general reminder, you should always follow good food safety practices when handling any raw meat. These practices include washing hands with warm water and soap both before and after handling any raw meat; wash the cutting board, knives, and countertops with hot, soapy water, and keeping unwrapped raw meat away from any cooked food. If you ensure that pork is cooked properly (not pink in the middle) to an internal temperature of 160° Fahrenheit or 71° Celcius, you will kill any foodborne germs.

Can dogs and cats catch the disease?

Currently, it is unclear whether dogs or cats can contract this virus; while transmission to these other species is unlikely, it cannot be discounted. If an animal is experiencing flu-like symptoms or signs of an upper respiratory infection, it would be wise to seek immediate veterinary care.

Are pigs catching and spreading the H1N1 virus?

To date, there is no evidence that pigs in Canada or the United States are infected with this strain of H1N1

virus. However, an infected person could easily spread this strain to pigs. Pigs with flu symptoms should be isolated from other animals or people and be seen by a veterinarian.

How do we protect ourselves?

"Wash your hands frequently and practice good hygiene."



To minimize your chance of infection, wash your hands frequently and practice good hygiene. If you are ill, stay home to avoid spreading the virus, and sneeze or cough into a disposable tissue which you immediately throw away. Evidence shows that the use of surgical masks by the general public is not effective in preventing transmission of influenza. Any person experiencing severe flu-like symptoms should immediately contact their health care provider. Because humans can spread the disease to pigs, people showing symptoms of influenza, especially those who have recently

returned from travel to Mexico or other affected areas should avoid visiting pig farms.

How do I keep up to date?

The World Health Organization is collaborating with the governments of countries with confirmed cases of swine influenza and will continue to issue updates as new cases occur. For accurate and up-to-date information, go to:

www.cdc.gov/swineflu/ (Centers for Disease Control)

www.phac-aspc.gc.ca (The Public Health Agency of Canada)

www.who.int/csr/disease/swineflu/en/index.html (World Health Organization)

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