

Swine Flu 2009

Description:

Swine influenza (swine flu) is a respiratory disease of pigs caused by type A influenza viruses that cause regular outbreaks in pigs. People do not usually get swine flu, but human infections can and do happen. Swine flu viruses have been reported to spread from person to person, but in the past this transmission was limited and not sustained beyond three people.

In late March and early April 2009, cases of human infection with swine influenza (H1N1) viruses were reported in Mexico and some parts of the United States (US). The majority of cases have occurred in Mexico, mainly affecting healthy young adults. Some of these cases have been severe. Person to person transmission appears to be occurring.

Initial cases in the US have not been severe. At present no cases of this strain of influenza have been identified in Australia.

Symptoms:

The symptoms of swine flu are similar to those of seasonal influenza, including:

- fever
- cough
- sore throat
- body aches
- headache
- chills
- fatigue

Some people have also reported diarrhoea and vomiting associated with swine flu. In the past, severe illness (pneumonia and respiratory failure) and deaths have been reported with swine flu infection in people. Like seasonal flu, swine flu may cause worsening of underlying chronic medical conditions.

Transmission:

Swine flu is contagious and is spreading from human to human. However, at this time, it is not known how easily the virus spreads between people.

Swine flu is thought to be spread from person to person in the same way seasonal influenza and other common respiratory infections spread.

Being in close contact (eg. within a metre) with an infected person while they are talking, coughing or sneezing puts you at risk of becoming infected. Virus-containing droplets can land on the surfaces of the mouth, nose and throat of people close by. The virus may also be spread through contact with infectious respiratory secretions on the hands of an infected person or other objects and surfaces.

Infectious Period

People with swine influenza virus infection should be considered potentially contagious as long as they are symptomatic and possibly for up to 7 days following illness onset. Children, especially younger children, might potentially be contagious for longer periods.

Treatment:

Antiviral medications such as oseltamivir (Tamiflu) and zanamivir (Relenza) can be used in the treatment of swine flu. Antiviral drugs are prescription medicines which fight against the flu by keeping flu viruses from reproducing in your body. Antiviral drugs work best if started soon after becoming sick (within 2 days of symptoms developing).

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Antibiotics may be required for secondary bacterial infections such as pneumonia.

Health Outcome:

Like seasonal flu, swine flu in humans can vary in severity from mild to severe.

Serious complications such as pneumonia can occur. People with existing health problems may be at risk of these conditions worsening if they develop swine flu.

Prevention:

The seasonal influenza vaccine is unlikely to offer useful protection against swine flu. However, it is strongly recommended that people continue to be vaccinated against seasonal influenza.

For both seasonal and swine flu, the best way to protect yourself and others is to:

- stay home when you are sick
- wash your hands frequently with soap and water or use an alcohol based hand gel
- wash your hands prior to touching your eyes, nose and mouth
- when coughing or sneezing, cover your mouth and nose with disposable tissues which should be disposed of immediately
- don't share items such as cigarettes, glasses or cups, lipstick, toys or anything which could be contaminated with respiratory secretions
- maintain at least one metre distance from people who have flu-like symptoms such as coughing or sneezing
- consult your doctor if you have a cough and fever. Follow their instructions, including taking medicine as prescribed.
- if attending a medical practice or hospital Emergency Department, telephone beforehand so that they can arrange for you to be seen away from other people.

Help and Assistance

For further information please contact your local doctor, population health unit or ring 13HEALTH.

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