

Swine Flu: Question and Answers

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Where can I get more advice?

General advice and information is available on the HPA website - www.hpa.org.uk. And on the NHS website www.nhs.uk or if you have specific health queries you can call NHS Direct on 0845 46 47 or visit www.nhsdirect.nhs.uk. There is now a specific flu phone line which provides pre-recorded information and in particular could be helpful to those who do not have internet access. The National Swine Flu Information Line – 0800 1 513 513.

GENERAL INFORMATION FOR STAFF, PATIENTS AND THE PUBLIC

What are the symptoms of swine flu?

The symptoms of swine flu in people are similar to the symptoms of regular human seasonal flu infection and include fever (more than 38C) or a history of fever and two or more of the following symptoms; cough, sore throat, runny nose, limb/joint pain, headache., For more about symptoms an NHS Direct flu symptom checker is available at: <http://tinyurl.com/c92jd4>

What should someone who has been to an affected area and is feeling sick do?

Anyone who has recently travelled to the affected areas (Mexico and certain parts of the USA – California, New York, Texas) and is experiencing flu-like illness should stay at home to limit contact with others, and seek medical advice from your GP Surgery or by contacting NHS Direct.

What should I do if I think I'm infected?

If you have the symptoms described and you have recently returned from Mexico or California, New York or Texas, stay at home and call your GP or NHS Direct on 0845 46 47. Do not go into your GP surgery, as you may spread the disease to others.

Can swine flu be treated?

Human swine flu can be treated as the virus is sensitive to available antiviral drugs. Antiviral drugs (such as Tamiflu) reduce the length of symptoms and usually their severity. Testing has shown that the human swine influenza H1N1 can be treated with these antivirals.

How will people suspected of having swine flu be tested and treated?

They will have a swab test taken from the throat and nose and this will be sent for testing. If tests show that they have probably been infected with the swine flu virus anti-viral treatment will be given (Tamiflu)

Close contacts (e.g. family members, work colleagues, classmates) of anyone confirmed as having swine flu will also be given anti-viral medication as prophylaxis

Is swine flu virus contagious?

It has been determined that this virus is contagious and it spreads between people, although it is not known how easily.

What measures can I take to protect against infection?

General infection control practices and good respiratory hand hygiene can help to reduce transmission of all viruses, including the human swine flu. This includes:

- Covering your nose and mouth when coughing or sneezing, using a tissue when possible
- Disposing of dirty tissues promptly and carefully
- Maintaining good basic hygiene, for example washing hands frequently with soap and water to reduce the spread of the virus from your hands to face or to other people
- Cleaning hard surfaces (e.g. door handles) frequently using a normal cleaning product
- Making sure your children follow this advice

How common are cases of swine flu?

Cases of swine flu in humans usually occur after direct or close contact with infected pigs. The person-to-person transmission that is being investigated in Mexico has been previously reported but appears to be rare. Infection with swine flu virus has been detected occasionally in humans since the 1950s. There have been no cases of swine flu identified in people in the UK for at least ten years. Through the regular seasonal flu surveillance that is done in Europe, a single case with mild symptoms was reported in November 2008 in Spain. In the US there is an active swine flu surveillance programme to monitor pig viruses as they see more diversity in viruses than in any other country.

Is this the next flu pandemic?

It is too early to say whether the cases seen so far will lead to a larger outbreak or could represent the appearance of potential pandemic strain of influenza virus.

The Director-General of the World Health Organization (WHO) is the decision maker in terms of declaring a flu pandemic and elevating the global stages of pandemic alert. Experts from around the world are working in close collaboration with WHO to help determine what risk this situation poses to global public health.

What is the difference between seasonal flu, avian flu, swine flu and a flu pandemic?

Flu viruses are commonly circulating in the human and animal environment. Different strains can cause illness in humans, bird and pigs.

Seasonal flu is caused by flu viruses that are adapted to spread in humans (human flu). Humans have some natural immunity to the strains that are in common circulation, and this immunity can be boosted by immunisation with a seasonal flu vaccine.

Avian flu is caused by flu viruses adapted for infection in birds. Similarly, swine flu is caused by flu viruses adapted for infection in pigs.

These illnesses all bring forth the same respiratory symptoms in their hosts. Sometimes, humans and animals can pass strains of flu back and forth to one another, such as when humans become ill with avian or swine flu, usually from direct contact with animals who are ill.

A flu pandemic is defined as a new or novel flu virus that spreads easily between humans. When new flu viruses are introduced into the environment, humans don't have any natural immunity to protect against them. Therefore, there is a risk that that new flu viruses could develop into a pandemic if the virus passes easily from human to human.

Why is swine flu affecting humans?

Infection with swine flu virus has been detected occasionally in humans since the 1950s and human disease is usually clinically similar to disease caused by infections with human flu viruses. Cases of swine flu in humans usually occur after a history of exposure to pigs, i.e. direct or close contact with infected pigs. Person-to-person transmission, like cases currently under investigation in the US and Mexico, has been previously reported but appears to be rare.

Is it safe to eat pork or pork products?

It is important to stress that swine flu viruses are not transmitted by food. There is no risk of catching the illness from eating properly handled and cooked pork or pork products.

What is the latest travel advice?

The Foreign Office is now advising against all except essential travel to Mexico. The Foreign Office have also said that British nationals resident in or visiting Mexico may wish to consider whether they should remain in Mexico at this time. A special website <http://urgent.internationalsof.com> has the latest information and travel advice. This website will be continuously updated.

What is the advice to people who have recently travelled to areas affected by swine flu (e.g. Mexico and parts of the the USA) and have developed flu like symptoms after returning home?

Anyone who has symptoms of flu that have developed within seven days of visiting an affected area should stay at home (to limit contact with others), and seek medical advice by contacting NHS Direct on 0845 46 47 or by telephoning their GP surgery.

The clinical symptoms of swine flu are similar to human seasonal flu and include fever (of 38 degrees or more) and flu like illness (two or more of the following symptoms – cough, runny nose, limb/joint pain, headache).

Should the general public be using facemasks?

There is no conclusive evidence that facemasks protect healthy people in their day-to-day lives – and if used incorrectly, masks may even expose people to infection. Instead, we want people to focus on good hand hygiene, staying at home if they're feeling unwell with flu like symptoms, and covering their mouth when they cough or sneeze. These are simple, proven ways of protecting yourself and others from infection.

Who should be wearing a facemask?

The Health Protection Agency (HPA) recommends that health care workers should wear a facemask if they come into close contact with symptomatic individuals (within one metre) to reduce their risk of catching the virus from patients. However, the HPA does not recommend that healthy people wear facemasks to go about their everyday business.

Why are we saying health professionals should wear facemasks and not other public sector workers?

Healthcare workers will be at increased risk during any pandemic because they are likely to have close and frequent contact with infectious patients while providing vital care. Patients who need the attention of a doctor or nurse, especially those admitted to hospital are likely to be those who are more severely ill. They shed greater quantities of virus and this may increase the risk of transmission. Healthcare workers are very special people upon whom we will all rely if we ourselves become ill. They deserve the best support we can give them and providing face masks to them is fully justified.

Why aren't you encouraging the general public to wear facemasks?

Because there's no conclusive evidence that facemasks will protect healthy people in their day-to-day lives. We know the virus is spread by picking up the virus from touching infected surfaces, or by someone coughing or sneezing at very close range – so unless you're standing close to someone with the virus, wearing a facemask won't make a difference. There are concerns about the risks posed by not using facemasks correctly. Facemasks must be changed regularly as they are less effective when dampened by a person's breath. People may infect themselves when they take off their mask by touching the outer surface, or may infect others by not disposing of old masks safely. Finally, wearing a facemask may encourage complacency. We want people to focus on good hand hygiene, staying at home if you're feeling unwell, and covering your mouth when you cough or sneeze. They are the steps we need people to follow to keep themselves and others safe from infection.

If close proximity increases people's risk of infection, surely the Government should provide masks for family members in infected households?

People should take a range of preventative steps if a family member has suspected swine flu. Isolating the infected person in a separate room, covering the mouth when coughing or sneezing, and regular hand-washing are better for preventing transmission than wearing face masks.

If facemasks don't protect the general public, why are so many other countries advising people to wear them?

Different countries have different approaches. For example, France is encouraging the general public to buy their own supplies of masks as a precautionary measure. However, France is not stockpiling masks centrally – neither is the US.

There is no conclusive evidence that face masks will protect healthy people in public places, and may actually expose people to infection. That's why we're not recommending the general public wears face masks on a day-to-day basis.

Some people will want to buy their own masks. We're developing advice to make sure they use them safely and dispose of them sensibly to prevent infection.

What's the difference between facemasks for health workers and the masks you buy at B&Q? What's the difference between surgical facemasks and 'respirators'? Which ones are we purchasing?

Hospitals keep a stock of surgical, paper-based facemasks and specialist respirators and are issuing them as per normal. We have enough of these for the moment, but we are now buying more specialist respirators which don't let finer water droplets (aerosol) through. These are of a far higher specification than a facemask you might buy in hardware shops, and will give additional protection to health professionals exposed to water droplets from a patient while treating them. They will receive full training on how to use them.

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PLYMOUTH SPECIFIC INFORMATION

How prepared are we in Plymouth?

The UK was one of the first countries to have a flu pandemic contingency plan in place. The UK plan seeks to reduce the negative health impact of any pandemic and the possible disruption it may cause to essential services and people's daily lives. This will be through measures such as antiviral treatment and immunisation (when this becomes available), and preparing the NHS and society as far as possible.

The NHS in Plymouth has taken a proactive approach. We established a multi-agency Pandemic Flu planning group in 2006 to develop plans to provide an effective response locally to an influenza pandemic - reducing the impact on health, safeguarding essential services and minimising social disruption. We are working closely with NHS South West and the Health Protection Agency to ensure we act on the latest information and with local partner organisations to ensure effective co-ordination.

What is the advice to people in Plymouth?

Although there is no current identified risk to the health of people in Plymouth, the NHS is advising people to adopt good hygiene practice as normal:

- Cover your mouth and nose when coughing or sneezing, using a tissue whenever possible
- Dispose of dirty tissues promptly and carefully – bag and bin them
- Maintain good hygiene – washing hands frequently with soap and water
- Clean hard surfaces (e.g. kitchen worktops, door handles) frequently, using a normal cleaning product

Stay at home when you are sick – if you have a cough and a fever, it is best to rest at home, take medicines to relieve the symptoms and drink plenty of fluids. This will speed your recovery and help prevent the spread of infection. If you need medical advice or assistance, phone NHS Direct on 0845 4647 or your GP surgery.

Has the NHS in Plymouth got good access to antiviral drug treatments?

The UK has antiviral stockpiles for the population that will be distributed to areas as needed. We have local supplies in Plymouth and supplies will be increased if needed. When a patient presents with swine flu symptoms NHS clinicians have been advised to contact their local Health Protection Unit who are coordinating the distribution of antivirals. The drugs are then delivered straight to the patient's home, if this is the most appropriate route, so they can remain isolated from others.