

Influenza A (H1N1) (Commonly known as Swine Flu)

What is Influenza A (H1N1)?

Influenza A (H1N1) or swine influenza is a respiratory disease of pigs, caused by a type A influenza virus. Up to April 2009, human cases of swine influenza have most commonly happened in people who are around pigs. However, in April 2009, cases of human infection with influenza A (H1N1) were confirmed in Mexico and rapidly spread to countries around the world.

Why is Influenza A (H1N1) of concern?

The reason authorities are so concerned is that it has spread so widely. It is now officially classified a pandemic. A pandemic is a worldwide spread of a virus. The last flu pandemic in 1968 caused 800,000 deaths in 1968 in six weeks. The 1918-19 Spanish flu pandemic caused 50 million deaths worldwide. The current pandemic has spread with unprecedented speed.

How do people become infected?

Influenza A (H1N1), the virus is capable of spreading from person-to-person, mainly by coughing and sneezing by infected people. The virus is not transmitted by eating pork.

Normal seasonal influenza asserts its strongest effects on children and the elderly. New pandemic influenza viruses, however, are more likely to affect young, healthy adults in the 25-34 year old age group.

What are the symptoms of Influenza A (H1N1)?

The main difference is that the symptoms of the common cold and influenza are that symptoms of influenza come on rapidly and are typically accompanied by muscle aches and a fever. An important additional symptom of swine is that diarrhoea and vomiting have been quite prominent symptoms among cases. Early symptoms of influenza A (H1N1) are:

- Fever;
- Shortness of breath, cough, sore throat, runny nose, stuffy nose, sneezing;
- Headache, painful joints and muscles;
- Fatigue and weakness;
- Sometimes diarrhoea, abdominal pain, vomiting.

Secondary infections can include sinusitis, bronchitis, otitis media (ear infection), pneumonia and rhinitis due to the suppressed immune system. This pandemic has been characterised, to date, by the mildness of symptoms in the overwhelming majority of patients, who usually recover, even without medical treatment, within a week of the onset of symptoms.

What is the situation in Ireland?

On 28th July 2009, there were 276 confirmed cases in Ireland. 38 of these were as a result of in-country transmission. As a consequence of the increase in the number of cases in Ireland, the Department of Health and HSE management of the pandemic has progressed to a new approach which was instigated on 16th July from one of containment to one of alleviation. Resources are now focused on treating cases and preparing for mass immunisation with the pandemic vaccine.

How many cases can we expect?

Authorities in Ireland believe that current infection rates are similar to the 1957 pandemic. Based on this they predict there may be up to 2.1 million cases in Ireland with up to 78,000 hospitalisations and up to 53000 deaths.

Department of Health Plans

The Department of Health and Children (DoHC) has committed to supplying antivirals and has secured oseltamivir (tamiflu) for 25% of the population. 7.7 million doses of swine flu vaccine have been ordered. 500,000 surgical masks, 5 million pairs of disposable gloves and 150,000 surgical gowns have also been stockpiled.

Vaccines

Vaccination will be the primary public health intervention in the event of an influenza pandemic. There is currently no effective vaccine against the new H1N1 (A) virus but a vaccine is currently being developed by pharmaceutical industries a vaccine. Ireland has ordered enough vaccines to cover 90% of the population and it is anticipated that vaccines will become available from the end of August 2009. People will need to receive two vaccinations each, separated by 3-4 weeks. It is important to remember that the usual at-risk groups should also be vaccinated against the seasonal influenza and this programme will commence at the end of September 2009.

The DoHC has suggested a priority list for vaccination: health care workers with patient contact; those with high medical risk; and children.

What to do if you suspect swine flu?

- If you feel you have flu symptoms and need medical advice, you can phone your GP for advice.
- You can also ring the HSE flu helpline at 1800 94 11 00 for advice
- Your GP will decide if you need anti-viral treatment or testing
- Most People do not need treatment with anti-virals and are able to recover at home
- Stay at home for up to 7 days or until you fully recover
- Discourage any visitors
- Take medicines such as paracetamol or ibuprofen to reduce the symptoms
- Drink plenty of fluids

Antivirals

It is not recommended for the general population to take antivirals to stop them from getting influenza; rather they should be restricted to people who display the influenza symptoms and their immediate close contacts if they are at-risk. These antivirals decrease the duration and the gravity of the flu symptoms and may prevent complications of the flu. If your GP decides you have swine flu and need anti-viral treatment, the anti-viral drug Tamiflu® is available for free from pharmacies. You need a valid prescription to receive Tamiflu®.

Preventing spread of flu

- Cover the nose and mouth with disposable tissues when sneezing, coughing, wiping and blowing the nose;
- Dispose of used tissues in the nearest waste bin;
- Wash hands often with soap and water or alcohol-based hand cleaners; especially after coughing or sneezing;
- Avoid close contact with sick people;
- Stay at home to avoid spreading infection to others.

Travel Advice

- Avoid close contact with people who have symptoms such as fever, sneezing, coughing or shivering;
- Pay close attention to health messages being broadcast;
- Wash hands frequently and thoroughly with soap and water or alcohol-based hand cleaners;
- If you are sick, avoid close contact with others, stay at home or in your hotel room;
- Seek medical care if severely ill;
- Do not travel or fly home if you are ill.

Boost your immunity

Having a healthy immune system by eating healthy will reduce your chances of acquiring swine flu and will mean a faster recovery if you do develop it. According to Luke O'Neill, professor of biochemistry at Trinity College Dublin in the Irish Times Health supplement on August 4th 2009, there is little benefit of extra vitamin C or zinc to boost your immune system as most Irish people have sufficient amount in their diet. Although he did point out "the herb Echinacea has fared better as an anti-viral agent in scientific tests, although its exact mechanism remains unknown and there's no evidence yet for any effect against swine flu"

Whelehans now stock "FLU PROTECTION PACKS" which include Echinacea, hand sanitizer amongst other items to reduce your risk of acquiring swine flu.

Disclaimer: Please ensure you consult with your healthcare professional before making any changes recommended

For comprehensive and free health advice and information call in to Whelehans, log on to www.whelehans.ie or dial 04493 34591.