

Influenza A (H1N1)

(Commonly known as Swine Flu)

This is the second article I have done in the Topic on Swine Flu. My first in August dealt with the symptoms of swine flu, how to prevent its spread and treatment if you get it. If you missed this article you can read it again in the ailments section of our website www.whelehans.ie. This article aims to update you on the current situation and the vaccination programme which the HSE has begun.

Situation now in Ireland

The HSE reports that the clinical illness continues to be mild in the majority of patients. As off November 14th the HSE reported 3914 laboratory confirmed cases of swine flu in Ireland, but there will have been many more which were not confirmed in a lab. Reported complications have been mostly respiratory in nature; 141 cases developed pneumonia and 49 developed acute respiratory distress syndrome (ARDS), a condition where the lungs get inflamed and gas exchange is reduced. Other reported but rare complications included chest infections, acute renal failure and multi-organ failure. There have been 16 reported deaths in Ireland due to swine flu, all in patients with underlying medical conditions.

Vaccines

Ireland has ordered enough vaccines to cover 90% of the population and the vaccines are now available. The HSE estimate that a quarter of the population would get swine flu if there was no vaccination programme.

Who can get vaccinated now?

First Group- people with Long Term Illness, Pregnant Women.

- **Pregnant women** - from 14 weeks pregnant to 6 weeks after giving birth
- **Anyone aged over 6 months and under 65 years who has:**

Long-term Lung Disease (like Asthma and Cystic Fibrosis)

Long-term Heart Disease

Long-term Kidney Disease

Long-term Liver Disease

Long-term Neurological Disease (like MS, Cerebral Palsy)

Immunosuppression e.g. cancer treatment (and their household contacts)

Haemoglobinopathies (Sickle Cell Anaemia, Thallassemia Major)

Diabetes

Morbid Obesity (check with your GP)

Second Group - Children and Older People

The HSE are currently announcing through the media that the following group are being called for vaccination

- People aged over 65 years
- Children from 6 months to under 5 years old (babies under 6 months cannot be vaccinated)

Third Group- School children aged 5 - 18

School age children aged 5 - 18 will be vaccinated in schools over the next two months and parents will be sent information and consent forms in advance. Pupils in smaller schools may have attend a HSE clinic. Everyone else will have to wait until these priority groups are vaccinated. Vaccinations are taking place in GP surgeries (not all GP surgeries are giving vaccinations) and in HSE clinics. The two clinics in Westmeath are at the County Hospital in Mullingar and at Clonbrusk, Athlone. Do not turn up at the clinic unless you book in advance and only book if you are in the current group being vaccinated. Announcements are being made via the media. You can book your appointment and get more information on the HSE website (www.hse.ie).

How long does it take the vaccine to work?

The vaccine can take up to two weeks to work so it is important to take the normal infection prevention precautions mentioned in this article in the mean time.

Do I need one or two doses of vaccine?

There are two different makes of vaccine being used in Ireland; Pandemrix and Celvapan. For the **Pandemrix** vaccine, one dose of the vaccine will be enough to protect most people from Swine Flu. The only exception to this is children aged under 13 years and people with immunosuppression who will require two doses of this vaccine. Immunosuppressed people would include people with cancer or on cancer treatment. For the **Celvapan** vaccine, 2 doses of vaccine are required to give full protection from Swine Flu. Both vaccines are considered to be equally effective and have the same safety profile.

What is Thiomersal and is it safe?

Thiomersal is an ingredient in the Pandemrix Swine Flu vaccine and, yes, it is safe. It is used to stop vaccines becoming contaminated and has been used as a preservative in medical products for over 60 years. Thiomersal is broken down to ethyl mercury in the body which is a safe by-product. Ethyl Mercury has been confused with methyl mercury which is toxic.

Is it safe for pregnant women to be vaccinated?

Yes. The vaccine is safe to use in pregnancy and is recommended for all women from 14 weeks pregnant to 6 weeks after giving birth.

Is there anyone who cannot get Swine Flu vaccine?

The vaccine should not be given to children under 6 months of age, and should be postponed if you have a temperature over 38°C. People with severe egg allergy should have the Celvapan vaccine, as the Pandemrix vaccine is made using eggs.

What can I expect after vaccination?

The most common side effects are mild and may include soreness, redness or swelling where the injection was given. Headache, fever, aches and tiredness may occur. Some people may have mild sweating and shivering as their immune system responds to the vaccine, but this is not Swine Flu and will pass after a day or so. Severe allergic reactions are expected to be very rare.

What if I don't feel well after vaccination?

Take paracetamol if you have a fever or any pain where the injection was given. If you are pregnant, take paracetamol for fever, not ibuprofen or aspirin. Avoid clothes rubbing against the injection area and drink plenty of fluids. If you still feel unwell, get medical advice.

Do I have to pay for the vaccine?

No. The vaccine and its administration is free to everyone.

What to do if you suspect swine flu?

- Stay at home for seven days – avoid spreading infection to others;
- Cover your nose and mouth with disposable tissues when sneezing, coughing, wiping and blowing your nose;
- Dispose of used tissues in the nearest waste bin;
- Wash your hands often with soap and water, especially after coughing and sneezing. Alcohol-based hand cleaners are also effective;
- Take simple anti-fever medication such as paracetamol or aspirin (NB. aspirin should NOT be given to children under 16 years of age) and drink plenty of fluids;
- If the symptoms do not improve or get worse, contact your GP.

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®.

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

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