

FREQUENTLY ASKED QUESTIONS – SWINE FLU

What is Swine Flu?

Swine flu is common disease of pigs and is caused by the same category of influenza virus (influenza A) that causes flu in humans. While outbreaks of swine flu are common in pigs, swine flu is uncommon in humans. It can occur, however, in individuals who are around pigs, and it is known that the virus can spread between humans in much the same way regular flu can spread, typically through coughing or sneezing as well as by contact with items contaminated by flu virus. Over the past four years, a dozen cases of swine flu have been reported in the United States. One death was reported, during an outbreak on an army base in 1976, and in 1988 a pregnant woman from Wisconsin died of swine flu. The current outbreak appears to be caused by a strain of swine flu not previously seen in humans (H1N1).

What are the Symptoms and Treatment of Swine Flu?

Swine flu in humans resembles seasonal flu, with symptoms such fever, cough, sore throat, body aches, headache, chills and fatigue. Some people experience diarrhea and vomiting as well. Like regular flu, swine flu can in some cases cause serious respiratory problems or worsening of chronic medical problems.

Swine flu can be treated with some of the same drugs that are used for regular flu. The U.S. Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) recommends the use of the antiviral medications oseltamivir (Tamiflu®) or zanamivir (Relenza®). The medications work best if they are started within two days of the onset of symptoms.

How Does Swine Flu Spread and Can It Be Prevented? Is There a Vaccine?

People can spread swine flu when they have symptoms and possibly as long as seven days after they first become ill, even if symptoms have subsided. It is also thought that children can remain contagious for an even longer period of time. There is currently no vaccine for prevention of swine flu, and vaccines used for seasonal flu provide no protective effect for the current H1N1 strain of swine flu. As a result, people should follow sensible preventive measures, like these recommended by the CDC:

- Cover your nose and mouth with a tissue when you cough or sneeze. Throw the tissue in the trash after you use it.
- Wash your hands often with soap and water, especially after you cough or sneeze. Alcohol-based hand cleaners are also effective.
- Try to avoid close contact with sick people.
- If you get sick with influenza, stay home from work or school and limit contact with others to keep from infecting them. Avoid touching your eyes, nose or mouth. Viruses spread this way.

At this time, the CDC recommends that people who live in or have recently traveled to San Diego and Imperial Counties in California or Guadalupe County in Texas and who develop flu symptoms consider seeking care from their health care providers. More serious symptoms require emergency medical care. In children, such symptoms include:

- Fast breathing or trouble breathing
- Bluish skin color
- Not drinking enough fluids
- Not waking up or not interacting
- Being so irritable that the child does not want to be held
- Flu-like symptoms improve but then return with fever and worse cough
- Fever with a rash

In adults, such symptoms include:

- Difficulty breathing or shortness of breath
- Pain or pressure in the chest or abdomen
- Sudden dizziness
- Confusion
- Severe or persistent vomiting

Swine flu is not spread by food, such as pork, which is safe when handled and prepared appropriately.

Should We Be Taking Special Precautions in the Workplace?

The general preventive measures noted above should be followed closely in the workplace, just as they should in the home and other settings. Frequent hand washing, particularly after sneezing or coughing, is a key preventive measure, according to the CDC. It should also be stressed that ill associates remain away from the workplace and keep in mind that they may be infectious to others as long as seven or possibly more days after the initial onset of symptoms, especially if symptoms have persisted. At this time, the CDC is not recommending widespread use of masks or other such preventive measures in the workplace.

What is Our Commitment in the Event of Pandemic Flu?

- Offer members coverage, within the scope of their benefit plans, for medically necessary care, including antiviral medications.
- Comply with state and federal regulatory guidelines for care, including those that override benefit language.
- Keep members and providers informed about the pandemic through resources available on our Web sites.
- Inform employers of Centers for Disease Control and other governmental recommendations and provide resources through our health plan Web sites.

- Expand current 24-hour phone access capabilities to serve as a clearinghouse for members, providers, employers, and others seeking information, support, and/or referral to appropriate resources.
- Facilitate the availability of clinical personnel among our associates who wish to volunteer their services, if such assistance is requested by government agencies.
- Support access to and capacity of customer service operations.
- Provide case identification and other data-related support services to government agencies as requested and as permitted by health information protection regulations and laws.

Where Can I Get Additional Information?

The following two Web sites are providing **continually updated information** regarding the outbreak as well as background information for individuals, clinicians, and organizations.

1. US Centers for Disease Control (CDC):
<http://www.cdc.gov/swineflu/investigation.htm><http://www.cdc.gov/swineflu/investigation.htm>
2. World Health Organization (WHO):
<http://www.who.int/csr/disease/swineflu/en/index.html>

Swine flu information provided by the U.S. Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC)