

## Swine flu

Human swine flu is a highly contagious respiratory disease caused by a new strain of influenza virus. Symptoms of human swine flu include a fever (temperature over 38°C), cough, sore throat, aches and tiredness. Human swine flu is also known as human swine influenza, influenza A (H1N1) virus or H1N1 influenza 09.

The name 'swine flu' comes from a strain of the virus that is found in pigs. In 2009, a new strain of the swine flu virus that affects humans was identified. Cases of human swine flu have been confirmed in countries throughout the world including Australia.

Despite some deaths in Victoria, the majority of cases of human swine flu have so far been mild and can be compared to the normal seasonal flu. Most people recover without any medical treatment. However, like seasonal flu, human swine flu may make underlying chronic medical conditions worse in vulnerable people.

### Symptoms

The symptoms of human swine flu usually cause short-term illness similar to seasonal flu. Symptoms may include:

- High temperature
- Cough
- Sore throat
- Body aches
- Running nose
- Headache
- Chills
- Fatigue
- Diarrhoea and vomiting (on occasions).

### Stay home if you have flu-like symptoms

If you have flu-like symptoms, you should stay at home and not attend work or school. Young children should be kept home from child care. Drink plenty of fluids and rest.

### Severe pneumonia is a dangerous complication

Human swine flu, like seasonal flu, can make underlying medical conditions worse. A potentially life-threatening complication of human swine flu is pneumonia (a type of lung infection). Some of the symptoms of pneumonia may include:

- Fever
- General malaise (feeling tired and unwell)
- Rapid breathing
- Breathing difficulties
- Cough
- Chest pain
- Loss of appetite
- Abdominal pain
- Headache
- Blue coloured skin around the mouth (cyanosis) caused by lack of oxygen.

## How the human swine flu virus is spread

The ways in which human swine flu can spread include:

- A person infected with human swine flu is contagious as long as they are showing symptoms and for up to three days from the start of antiviral treatment. Young children may be infectious for longer.
- A person caring for someone sick with human swine flu can become infected from inhaling infected sneeze or cough droplets. This is known as direct contact.
- The human swine flu virus can live for about two hours outside of the body. Infection can occur when a person touches a contaminated object (such as a dirty tissue) and then touches his or her own nose, eyes or mouth. This is known as indirect contact.
- In some cases, human swine flu is asymptomatic, which means the infected person feels fine and has no symptoms. However, they can still infect other people.

Pig farmers can be infected directly from infected pigs – for example, by handling sick pigs and not washing their hands.

## Swine flu is not spread by eating pork

The swine flu virus is not spread through food products. It is safe to eat pork, bacon and ham. The World Health Organization advises that swine influenza has not been shown to be transmissible to people through eating pork and pork meat products, even in those countries where there has been a major outbreak of human swine flu.

Eating properly handled and cooked pork and other pork products is safe.

## Diagnosis

Consult with your doctor as soon as you start to feel unwell with flu-like symptoms. You should call ahead to alert medical staff before attending your appointment. If your doctor suspects you may have human swine flu, the medical staff will wear gloves and masks and will isolate you from other patients to reduce the risk of passing the virus on to other people.

Diagnosis methods may include:

- Medical history
- Travel history
- Physical examination
- Nose and throat swabs (for laboratory analysis).

## Looking after yourself

Self-care instructions for a person with human swine flu are the same as for seasonal flu:

- Drink plenty of fluids.
- Stay at home and get plenty of rest.

## Treatment – medication

There are no drugs specific to human swine flu, although a free vaccine is available in Australia. An antiviral medication such as oseltamivir (Tamiflu) can prevent the influenza virus from spreading inside your body, if started within 48 hours of the first symptoms. This may reduce the severity of symptoms and the time taken to recover from illness.

Tamiflu can also be taken as a preventative measure if you have been in close contact with someone who is confirmed as having human swine flu (for example, if you share a house).

## Avoid unnecessary medication

If you have not been diagnosed with human swine flu or you are not a close contact, you do not need to take Tamiflu. Having medication when you don't need it can unnecessarily expose you to potential allergic reactions and side effects. In the case of antivirals, it may also reduce the future effectiveness of the drug against the influenza virus. Discuss whether you need medication with your doctor.

## Reduce the risk of infection

Good hygiene is very important and can reduce your risk of getting human swine flu or passing it onto other people. If you have the flu, take steps to reduce the risk of transmission to others in your household. Remember to:

- Cover your nose and mouth with a tissue when you cough or sneeze. Throw the tissue in the garbage bin 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.
- Avoid touching your eyes, nose or mouth. Germs spread that way.
- Avoid public places and close contact with others if you have the flu. Especially avoid contact with children or the elderly, who tend to be more vulnerable to infectious diseases.

To further reduce your risk of getting human swine flu:

- Look after yourself and don't get run down. Get plenty of sleep and eat a healthy diet.
- Avoid travelling to areas where outbreaks have occurred.
- Avoid sick pigs or sick people if possible.
- Be immunised. The seasonal flu vaccine may not protect against human swine flu, but is still recommended as protection against seasonal flu – especially for those in high risk categories, such as the elderly and those with chronic illness.

## Human swine flu vaccine

Australia's human swine flu vaccination program aims to protect those who are most at risk of exposure to the H1N1 influenza 09 (human swine flu) virus. This includes healthcare workers and people who are more vulnerable to severe health complications from human swine flu.

The vaccine is free of charge, although your provider may charge you a service fee.

People from high risk groups are especially encouraged to have the human swine flu vaccine. These include:

- Pregnant women
- People with chronic health conditions such as asthma, heart and lung disease, cancer, obesity, diabetes, kidney disease, neurological disease and people with suppressed immune systems
- Children in special schools
- Healthcare workers
- Indigenous people
- Parents and guardians of infants under six months old.

The vaccine is also available for anyone else who wishes to protect themselves from human swine flu, including healthy people.

Contact your doctor or immunisation provider to make an appointment.

For more information about the human swine flu vaccine program, call the Swine Influenza Hotline on 180 2007 or visit the Victorian Government Human Swine Flu website.

## Where to get help

- Swine Influenza Hotline Tel. 180 2007
- Victorian Government Human Swine Flu Information
- Your doctor (GP) – for medical advice if you have a flu-like illness (fever, cough and fatigue)

- Nurse-on-Call Tel. 1300 60 60 24 – for expert health information and advice (24 hours, 7 days)
- The emergency department of your local hospital – only if you are seriously unwell with flu-like symptoms
- Smartraveller – for travel advice

## Things to remember

- Human swine flu usually causes a short-term illness similar to seasonal flu.
- Good hygiene is very important and can reduce your risk of getting human swine flu or passing it on to other people.
- Australia has very good communicable disease surveillance and control systems in place to detect and respond to outbreaks of illness.
- A free vaccine is available in Australia for everyone who wants it. The vaccine is especially important for people at high risk.

**This page has been produced in consultation with, and approved by:**

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