

Swine Influenza- Frequently Asked Questions



Swine Flu

What is Swine Influenza?

Swine Influenza (swine flu) is a respiratory disease of pigs caused by type A influenza virus that regularly causes outbreaks of influenza in pigs. Swine flu viruses cause high levels of illness and low death rates in pigs. Swine influenza viruses may circulate among swine throughout the year, but most outbreaks occur during the late autumn and winter months similar to outbreaks in humans. The classical swine flu virus (an influenza type A H1N1 virus) was first isolated from a pig in 1930.

How many swine flu viruses are there?

Like all influenza viruses, swine flu viruses change constantly. Pigs can be infected by avian influenza and human influenza viruses as well as swine influenza viruses. When influenza viruses from different species infect pigs, the viruses can reassort (i.e. swap genes) and new viruses that are a mix of swine, human and/or avian influenza viruses can emerge. Over the years, different variations of swine flu viruses have emerged. At this time, there are four main influenza type A virus subtypes that have been isolated in pigs: H1N1, H1N2, H3N2, and H3N1. However, most of the recently isolated influenza viruses from pigs have been H1N1 viruses.

Swine Flu in Humans

Can humans catch swine flu?

Swine flu viruses do not normally infect humans. However, sporadic human infections with swine flu have occurred. Most commonly, these cases occur in persons with direct exposure to pigs (e.g. children near pigs at a fair or workers in the swine industry). In addition, there have been documented cases of one person spreading swine flu to others. For example, an outbreak of apparent swine flu infection in pigs in Wisconsin in 1988 resulted in multiple human infections, and, although no community outbreak resulted, there was antibody evidence of virus transmission from the patient to health care workers who had close contact with the patient.

How common is swine flu infection in humans?

In the past, CDC received reports of approximately one human swine influenza virus infection every one to two years in the U.S., but from December 2005 through February 2009, 12 cases of human infection with swine influenza have been reported.

What are the symptoms of swine flu in humans?

The symptoms of swine flu in people are expected to be similar to the symptoms of regular human seasonal influenza and include fever, lethargy, lack of appetite and coughing. Some people with swine flu also have reported runny nose, sore throat, nausea, vomiting and diarrhea.

Can people catch swine flu from eating pork?

No. Swine influenza viruses are not transmitted by food. You can not get swine influenza from eating pork or pork products. Eating properly handled and cooked pork and pork products is safe.

How does swine flu spread?

Influenza viruses can be directly transmitted from pigs to people and from people to pigs. Human infection with flu viruses from pigs are most likely to occur when people are in close proximity to infected pigs, such as in pig barns and livestock exhibits housing pigs at fairs. Human-to-human transmission of swine flu can also occur. This is thought to occur in the same way as seasonal flu occurs in people, which is mainly person-to-person transmission through coughing or sneezing of people infected with the influenza virus. People may become infected by touching something with flu viruses on it and then touching their mouth or nose.



How can human infections with swine influenza be diagnosed?

To diagnose swine influenza A infection, a respiratory specimen would generally need to be collected within the first 4 to 5 days of illness (when an infected person is most likely to be shedding virus). However, some persons, especially children, may shed virus for 10 days or longer. Identification as a swine flu influenza A virus requires sending the specimen for laboratory testing.

What medications are available to treat swine flu infections in humans?

There are four different antiviral drugs that are licensed for use in the US for the treatment of influenza: amantadine, rimantadine, oseltamivir and zanamivir. While most swine influenza viruses have been susceptible to all four drugs, the most recent swine influenza viruses isolated from humans are resistant to amantadine and rimantadine. At this time, CDC recommends the use of oseltamivir or zanamivir for the treatment and/or prevention of infection with swine influenza viruses.

Is the H1N1 swine flu virus the same as human H1N1 viruses?

No. The H1N1 swine flu viruses are antigenically very different from human H1N1 viruses and, therefore, vaccines for human seasonal flu would not provide protection from H1N1 swine flu viruses.

Which countries have been affected by outbreaks in pigs?

Swine influenza is not notifiable to international animal health authorities (OIE, www.oie.int), therefore its international distribution in animals is not well known. The disease is considered endemic in the United States. Outbreaks in pigs are also known to have occurred in North America, South America, Europe (including the UK, Sweden, and Italy), Africa (Kenya), and in parts of eastern Asia including China and Japan.

What about the pandemic risk?

It is likely that most of people, especially those who do not have regular contact with pigs, do not have immunity to swine influenza viruses that can prevent the virus infection. If a swine virus establishes efficient human-to-human transmission, it can cause an influenza pandemic. The impact of a pandemic caused by such a virus is difficult to predict: it depends on virulence of the virus, existing immunity among people, cross protection by antibodies acquired from seasonal influenza infection and host factors.

Is there a human vaccine to protect from swine influenza?

There are no vaccines that contain the current swine influenza virus causing illness in humans. It is not known whether current human seasonal influenza vaccines can provide any protection. Influenza viruses change very quickly. It is important to develop a vaccine against the currently circulating virus strain for it to provide maximum protection to the vaccinated people. This is why WHO needs access to as many viruses as possible in order to select the most appropriate candidate vaccine virus.

How can I protect myself from getting swine influenza from infected people?

In the past, human infection with swine influenza was generally mild but is known to have caused severe illness such as pneumonia. For the current outbreaks in the United States and Mexico however, the clinical pictures have been different. None of the confirmed cases in the United States have had the severe form of the disease and the patients recovered from illness without requiring medical care. In Mexico, some patients reportedly had the severe form of the disease.

To protect yourself, practice general preventive measures for influenza:

- Avoid close contact with people who appear unwell and who have fever and cough.
- Wash your hands with soap and water frequently and thoroughly.
- Practice good health habits including adequate sleep, eating nutritious food, and keeping physically active.





If there is an ill person at home:

- Try to provide the ill person a separate section in the house. If this is not possible, keep the patient at least 1 meter in distance from others.
- Cover mouth and nose when caring for the ill person. Masks can be bought commercially or made using the readily available materials as long as they are disposed of or cleaned properly.
- Wash your hands with soap and water thoroughly after each contact with the ill person.
- Try to improve the air flow in the area where the ill person stays. Use doors and windows to take advantage of breezes.
- Keep the environment clean with readily available household cleaning agents.

If you are living in a country where swine influenza has caused disease in humans, follow additional advice from national and local health authorities.

What should I do if I think I have swine influenza?

If you feel unwell, have high fever, cough and/or sore throat:

- Stay at home and keep away from work, school or crowds as much as possible.
- Rest and take plenty of fluids.
- Cover your mouth and nose with disposable tissues when coughing and sneezing and dispose of the used tissues properly.
- Wash your hands with soap and water frequently and thoroughly, especially after coughing or sneezing.
- Inform family and friends about your illness and seek help for household chores that require contact with other people such as shopping.

If you need medical attention:

- Contact your doctor or healthcare provider before travelling to see them and report your symptoms. Explain why you think you have swine influenza (for example, if you have recently travelled to a country where there is a swine influenza outbreak in humans). Follow the advice given to you for care.
- If it is not possible to contact your healthcare provider in advance, communicate your suspicion of having swine influenza immediately upon arrival at the healthcare facility.
- Take care to cover your nose and mouth during travel

For further information:

- www.cdc.gov/swineflu/swineflu_you.htm
- www.cdc.gov/swineflu/key_facts.htm
- www.who.int/en/
- www.public.health.wa.gov.au



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