

Update on April 30, 2009

Swine Influenza Q & A

What is Swine Influenza?

Swine influenza (swine flu) is a respiratory disease of pigs caused by type A influenza. Outbreaks of swine flu happen regularly in pigs. There are four main influenza subtypes that have been isolated in pigs: H1N1, H1N2, H3N2, and H3N1. Most of the recently isolated influenza viruses from pigs are H1N1 viruses.

Can humans catch swine flu?

The H1N1 swine flu viruses are antigenically different from human H1N1 viruses and swine flu viruses do not normally infect humans. However, sporadic human swine flu do occasionally occur. Most commonly, human swine influenza happens in people with direct exposure to pigs (e.g. workers in the swine industry). Human-to-human transmission of swine flu can also occur.

What are the symptoms of human swine flu ?

The symptoms of human swine influenza are usually similar to those of human seasonal influenza and include fever, lethargy, loss of appetite and coughing. Some people infected with swine flu may also have runny nose, sore throat, nausea, vomiting and diarrhoea.

How does swine flu spread?

Swine flu can be directly transmitted from pigs to people and from people to pigs. Human-to-human transmission of swine flu can also occur. This is thought to occur in the same way as seasonal flu occurring in people, which is mainly through coughing or sneezing. People may also become infected by touching objects soiled with flu viruses and then touching their nose or mouth.

Can I get swine flu from eating pork?

No. Eating properly handled and cooked pork products is safe. Swine flu viruses are not transmitted by food. The swine influenza virus like other bacteria and virus is killed by cooking temperature of 70°C (160°F).

Which countries have been confirmed with human swine flu cases?

As of April 29, 2009 - Mexico, USA (California, Texas, Kansas, New York, Ohio, Indiana), Canada (Nova Scotia, British Columbia, Alberta and Ontario) ,Spain, UK(Scotland), New Zealand, Israel, Austria and Germany. For update information, please refer to Centre for Health Protection website: <http://www.chp.gov.hk/> and WHO website: <http://www.who.int/en/>.

Should I travel to the countries with confirmed human swine flu cases?

As of April 29, 2009, WHO still advised no restriction of regular travel to the affected areas. The Department of Health in Hong Kong advised to avoid travelling to affected places unless it is absolutely necessary. If such a visit is unavoidable:

- During the trip: put on a mask and do not have contact with sick people.
- After returning: pay close attention to your health and wear masks for 7 days. Seek medical consultation from public clinics or hospitals right always if fever or influenza-like symptoms appear.

Does flu vaccine protect me from human swine flu?

No. Vaccines for human seasonal flu would not provide protection against H1N1 swine flu viruses.

Are there medicines to treat swine flu?

It is currently recommended to use oseltamivir (Tamiflu) or zanamivir (Relenza) for the treatment and / or prevention of swine flu. These antiviral drugs must be prescribed by doctors. Please consult your doctor immediately for appropriate treatment advice once you have flu symptoms.

Is there a way to prevent infection?

You should take the following precautionary measures:

- Keep hands clean and wash hands properly. Alcohol-based handrub is also effective when hands are not visibly soiled.
- Avoid touching eyes, nose or mouth.
- Wash hands with liquid soap promptly if they are dirtied by respiratory secretions, e.g. after sneezing or coughing.
- Cover nose and mouth when sneezing or coughing.
- No spitting. Always wrap nasal and mouth discharges with tissue paper, and dispose of the tissue paper properly in a lidded rubbish bin.

- Wear mask when symptoms of respiratory tract infection or fever develop. Seek medical advice promptly.
- Refrain from work or school if develop symptoms of influenza.

What is the pandemic risk of swine flu?

As of April 29, 2009, WHO has raised the level of influenza pandemic alert from the current Phase 4 to Phase 5. WHO warned that the pandemic is imminent and advised all countries should immediately activate their pandemic preparedness plans.

WHO has 6 Phases of influenza pandemic alert. Phase 3 indicates Limited human-to-human transmission but not sufficient to sustain community-level outbreaks. Phase 4 indicates that the likelihood of a pandemic has increased, but not that a pandemic is inevitable. Phase 5 is characterized by human-to-human spread of the virus into at least two countries in one WHO region and will indicate that a global pandemic is under way. Phase 6 is characterized by community level outbreaks in at least one other country in a different WHO region.

The impact of a pandemic caused by swine flu 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.

Sources:

World Health Organization (WHO) website: <http://www.who.int/en/>

Centres for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC): <http://www.cdc.gov/>

Centre of Health Protection (CHP): <http://www.chp.gov.hk/>