

Advice to the public 27th April 2009.

Department of Health and Children

THE HUMAN SWINE INFLUENZA OUTBREAK

FREQUENTLY ASKED QUESTIONS:

This advice is current as of April 27th 2009. As the situation may change over time the advice will be updated in response to advice from the pandemic influenza expert group and the World Health Organisation. Please keep updated by rechecking this advice.

What is swine influenza?

Swine influenza (swine flu) is a respiratory disease of pigs caused by type A influenza viruses. Outbreaks of swine influenza happen regularly in pigs.

Can swine influenza infect humans?

People do not normally get swine influenza, but human infections can and do occur. Up to now, human cases of swine influenza have most commonly happened in people who are around pigs but it is possible for swine influenza viruses to spread from person to person.

What is an Influenza Pandemic?

An influenza pandemic is a worldwide flu epidemic. It can start when three conditions have been met:

1. A new influenza virus subtype appears
2. It infects humans, causing serious illness

3. It spreads easily between humans.

A new virus may be a re-emerging human virus subtype which has not been in circulation for some time, or a virus originating in birds or pigs which has changed into a form that is highly infectious for humans.

A pandemic can cause serious illness and death and can give rise to enormous social and economic disruption worldwide.

What are the symptoms of swine influenza in people?

The symptoms are like those of regular seasonal flu and include: fever of sudden onset, cough, sore throat, runny nose, headache and muscle aches. Some people have vomiting and diarrhoea. In severe cases, pneumonia may develop and death may occur.

What should I do if I get sick?

If you get sick with a flu-like illness as described above, and have recently visited an affected area or have been in contact with a known case of swine flu, contact your GP/family doctor by telephone. They will decide if you need testing or treatment.

Is there swine influenza in Ireland?

As of today 27th of April there are no confirmed cases of swine influenza in Ireland. The disease could spread to Ireland and it has been identified as a virus that has potential to cause a pandemic.

Is it reasonable to expect cases here in Ireland?

It is not unlikely that we will have cases of swine influenza here in Ireland.

Will antiviral drugs be used?

Antiviral drugs may be useful in the treatment of swine influenza in the event of a pandemic and if so, they will be used accordingly. Ireland has a stockpile of oseltamivir (Tamiflu) sufficient to treat 25% of the population, and of zanamivir (Relenza) sufficient to treat 20% of the population aged over 7 years. International monitoring is ongoing to ascertain the effectiveness of these drugs for this particular virus.

Is Ireland prepared for an outbreak of swine influenza?

A national plan for pandemic influenza was put in place in January 2007, describing the whole of government response to a possible worldwide pandemic. Additionally **The National Pandemic Expert Group** has produced Expert Influenza Guidance in November 2008 which is currently being followed. It met today 27th April and will meet on a frequent basis to assess the public health and clinical guidance to ensure an appropriate level of preparedness and response for Ireland. The Department is in close contact with the World Health Organisation and the European Centre for Disease Prevention and Control.

What is being done currently to prepare for a possible outbreak of flu?

Since receipt of the alert, the Chief Medical Officer of the Department of Health and Children has been in close contact with

the HSE and the National Pandemic Expert Group which met this afternoon. The Department of Health and Children and HSE have been participating in daily teleconference meetings with the European Centres for Disease Control, public health officials in other European Member States and the WHO.

The Department of Health and Children is the lead government department for public health emergencies and works closely with the HSE in response to pandemic influenza. The **National Public Health Emergency Team (NPHE)** is also meeting today 27th April to coordinate the response to this threat. This is the forum for managing responses between DOHC and the HSE during the planning and response phases of a public health emergency. NPHE is chaired by the Secretary General of the Department of Health and children.

The Government **Interdepartmental Committee** which meets tomorrow 28th April, deals with health emergency planning involving transport, foreign affairs, education, security, etc.

Are there any plans to close schools or universities?

There are currently no confirmed cases of this influenza in Ireland. There is no need to close schools, universities or crèches/pre-schools. This advice will only change on advice from experts and the EU and WHO.

What can I do to reduce the risk of illness spread if there is a pandemic?

Advice will be made available to ensure that the public are kept informed as to the up-to-date situation if an outbreak occurs in Ireland. There is comprehensive guidance for the public *The National Pandemic Influenza Plan* available on this website:

<http://www.dohc.ie/publications/pdf/nationalfluplan.pdf?direct=1>

People will be advised regarding the need to stay at home if suffering a flu-like illness and to take the respiratory precautions of frequent hand-washing, covering their mouth and nose if coughing or sneezing and using a tissue which should be disposed of immediately after use.

Is it safe to travel to the affected areas in Mexico, the United States or other affected countries?

Our current advice is to not restrict travel to affected areas and this is consistent with advice from the WHO. This position will be kept under review in consultation with other EU states and the WHO. People who intend to travel to these regions are advised to consult the WHO website <http://www.who.int/en/> for updates.

Can we vaccinate against this type of influenza?

Vaccination is the ideal primary public health response in the event of an influenza pandemic. However, the production of a vaccine against a new virus may take 4-6 months at a minimum.

International experts are examining if there is some protection from seasonal influenza vaccine. If this vaccine provides some protection, it may be used in the control of any outbreaks that may occur.

What about protective devices such as masks?

Evidence on the effectiveness of masks in different situations is used to give advice on whether masks are of benefit. The HSE has

stockpiles of masks and other protective equipment to be used in the event that they are required.

What precautions are needed for travellers returning from affected areas?

Travellers returning from affected areas should observe their personal health and if, within 7 days after return, they experience an illness like that described above they should stay at home and immediately contact their GP/family doctor.

What travel precautions should I take when travelling to an affected area?

- Familiarise yourself with sources of health advice in the country of travel.
- Avoid close contact with people who have fever, sneezing or cough.
- General advice includes frequent and thorough hand washing with soap and water, or alcohol based hand cleaners.
- If you are sick, avoid close contact with others, stay at home or in your hotel room.
- If you have a mild flu-like illness seek medical advice over the phone if practical.
- Seek medical care if severely ill. Antiviral medications can be prescribed for treatment of influenza.
- Do not travel if you are ill.
- Cover your nose and mouth with a tissue when coughing, sneezing or wiping and dispose of tissues into a bin immediately.
- If you are caring for someone who is ill, try to ensure they are not in close contact with others. Wearing a mask may be protective, for those who are caring for someone with influenza.

Further information:

<http://www.hpsc.ie/>

<http://www.hse.ie/eng/>

<http://www.who.int/csr/disease/swineflu/en/index.html>

<http://www.cdc.gov/swineflu/>

<http://ecdc.europa.eu/en/>