

Human Swine Influenza

Background

The World Health Organization has declared the human swine influenza A/H1N1 (swine flu) outbreak a global pandemic. Confirmed cases of swine flu have been reported in many parts of the world, including Hong Kong.

Originally known to circulate among pig populations, the swine flu viruses do occasionally infect human beings. In this present international swine flu outbreak, human-to-human transmission has occurred.

Symptoms

The symptoms of human swine influenza are usually similar to those of human seasonal influenza and include fever, cough, sore throat, runny nose, muscle pain and headache. Some people infected with swine flu may also have vomiting and diarrhoea.

Mode of transmission

The period of communicability for swine flu is unknown at present. Human-to-human transmission of swine flu is thought to occur in the same way as seasonal flu is spread among people, mainly through coughing or sneezing. It is presumed that as with seasonal influenza virus, a person may infect another person one day before symptoms start, and up to seven or more days after becoming sick. This can be longer in some people, especially children and people with weakened immune systems. People with swine flu virus infection should be considered contagious for as long as they show symptoms.

People may also become infected by touching objects soiled with flu viruses and then touching their mouth, nose or eyes.

Swine flu has not been known to be transmissible to people through eating properly handled and cooked pork or pork products. Cooking pork to an internal temperature of 70°C (160°F) kills the swine flu virus.

Management

People who develop flu symptoms should put on a mask and consult a doctor as soon as possible. Those who have been to affected places or been exposed to sick persons should tell the doctor the travel and contact history. Antiviral agents can reduce the severity and duration of illness but must be used under doctor's prescription. It is important for people not to self-medicate.

Prevention

Since H1N1 swine flu viruses are very different from human H1N1 viruses, vaccines for human seasonal flu will not provide protection against H1N1 swine flu viruses.

Members of the public should observe 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 mouth, nose or eyes.
- Wash hands with liquid soap promptly if they are dirtied by respiratory secretions, e.g. after sneezing or coughing.
- Cover mouth and nose when sneezing or coughing.
- Avoid going to crowded or poorly-ventilated places. If you must do so, step up personal hygiene and put on a mask.
- Do not spit. Always wrap nasal and mouth discharges with tissue paper, and dispose of the tissue paper properly in a rubbish bin with a lid.
- Wear a mask when respiratory symptoms or fever develop. See a doctor right away.
- Do not go to work or school if you develop influenza-like symptoms.

Strict adherence to personal and environmental hygiene is essential for prevention of swine flu. Department of Health reminds travellers to watch out for the latest developments in the swine flu outbreak when planning travel. Travellers should prepare adequate face masks and alcohol-based handrub and take the following precautionary measures:

- During the trip: maintain good personal hygiene, wash hands or use handrub frequently and avoid contact with sick people.
- Before returning: do not get on board an airplane when influenza-like symptoms develop. Put on a mask and seek medical attention where you are.
- After returning: avoid going to crowded places and pay close attention to your health. Seek medical consultation from public clinics or hospitals right away if fever or influenza-like symptoms appear.

For enquiries, please call 2125 1111.

14 September 2009 version