

### **What is swine flu?**

Like people, pigs can get influenza (flu), but swine flu viruses aren't the same as human flu viruses. Swine flu doesn't often infect people, and the rare human cases that have occurred in the past have mainly affected people who had direct contact with pigs. But the current swine flu outbreak is different. It's caused by a new swine flu virus that has spread from person to person -- and it's happening among people who haven't had any contact with pigs.

### **What are swine flu symptoms?**

Symptoms of swine flu are like regular flu symptoms and include fever, cough, sore throat, body aches, headache, chills, and fatigue. Some people have reported diarrhea and vomiting associated with swine flu. Those symptoms can also be caused by many other conditions, and that means that you and your doctor can't know, just based on your symptoms, if you've got swine flu. It takes a lab test to tell whether it's swine flu or some other condition.

### **If I think I have swine flu, what should I do? When should I see my doctor?**

If you have flu symptoms, stay home, and when you cough or sneeze, cover your mouth and nose with a tissue. Afterward, throw the tissue in the trash and wash your hands. That will help prevent your flu from spreading.

If you've got flu symptoms, and you've recently been to a high-risk area like Mexico, CDC officials recommend that you see your doctor. If you have flu symptoms but you haven't been in a high-risk area, you can still see a doctor -- that's your call.

Keep in mind that your doctor will not be able to determine whether you have swine flu, but he or she would take a sample from you and send it to a state health department lab for testing to see if it's swine flu. If your doctor suspects swine flu, he or she would be able to write you a prescription for Tamiflu or Relenza. Those drugs may not be required; U.S. swine flu patients have made a full recovery without it.

### **How does swine flu spread? Is it airborne?**

The new swine flu virus apparently spreads just like regular flu. You could pick up germs directly from an infected person, or by touching an object they recently touched, and then touching your eyes, mouth, or nose, delivering their germs for your own infection. That's why you should make washing your hands a habit, even when you're not ill. Infected people can start spreading flu germs up to a day before symptoms start, and for up to seven days after getting sick, according to the CDC.

The swine flu virus can become airborne if you cough or sneeze without covering your nose and mouth, sending germs into the air.

The U.S. residents infected with swine flu virus had no direct contact with pigs. The CDC says it's likely that the infections represent widely separated cycles of human-to-human infections.

### **How is swine flu treated?**

The new swine flu virus is sensitive to the antiviral drugs Tamiflu and Relenza. The CDC recommends those drugs to prevent or treat swine flu; the drugs are most effective when taken within 48 hours of the start of flu symptoms. But not everyone needs those drugs; many of the first people in the U.S. with lab-confirmed swine flu recovered without treatment. The Department of Homeland Security has released 25% of its stockpile of Tamiflu and Relenza to states. Health officials have such a vaccine. That's a lengthy process -- it takes months.

### **I had a flu vaccine this season. Am I protected against swine flu?**

No. This season's flu vaccine wasn't made with the new swine flu virus in mind; no one saw this virus coming ahead of time.

If you were vaccinated against flu last fall or winter, that vaccination will go a long way toward protecting you against certain human flu virus strains. But the new swine flu virus is a whole other problem.

### **How can I prevent swine flu infection?**

The CDC recommends taking these steps:

- Wash your hands regularly with soap and water, especially after coughing or sneezing. Or use an alcohol-based hand cleaner.
- Avoid close contact with sick people.
- Avoid touching your mouth, nose, or eyes.

### **What else should I be doing?**

Keep informed of what's going on in your community. Your state and local health departments will have important information if swine flu develops in your area.

### **How severe is swine flu?**

The severity of cases in the current swine flu outbreak has varied widely. In Mexico, there have been deaths and other severe cases. Early cases in the U.S. have been mild. But that could change. The virus itself could change, either becoming more or less dangerous. Scientists are watching closely to see which way the new swine flu virus is heading -- but health experts warn that flu viruses are notoriously hard to predict, as far as how and when they'll change.

### **Why has the swine flu infection been deadlier in Mexico than in the U.S.?**

It is unclear why U.S. cases have been milder compared to those in Mexico. Among the first 20 reported cases in the U.S., only one patient required hospitalization and that person has fully recovered. CDC researchers are actively investigating to learn more about the differences between the cases in Mexico and those in the U.S.

### **Have there been previous swine flu outbreaks?**

Yes. There was a swine flu outbreak at Fort Dix, N.J., in 1976 among military recruits. It lasted about a month and then went away as mysteriously as it appeared. As many as 240 people were infected; one died.

Concern that a new H1N1 pandemic might return in winter 1976 led to a crash program to create a vaccine and vaccinate all Americans against swine flu. That vaccine program ran into all kinds of problems -- not the least of which was public perception that the vaccine caused excessive rates of dangerous reactions. After more than 40 million people were vaccinated, the effort was abandoned. As it turned out, there was no swine flu epidemic.

**I was vaccinated against the 1976 swine flu virus. Am I still protected?**

We are unsure. The new swine flu virus is different from the 1976 virus, but it's not clear whether a vaccine given more than 30 years ago would still be effective.

**How many people have swine flu?**

That's a hard question to answer, because the figure is changing so quickly. If you want to keep track of U.S. cases that have been confirmed by lab tests and reported to the CDC, check the CDC's web site. If you're looking for cases in other countries, visit the World Health Organization's web site. And when you hear about large numbers of people who are ill, remember that lab tests may not yet have been done to confirm that they have swine flu. And there may be a little lag time before confirmed cases make it into the official tally.