

Influenza A (H1N1) Frequently Asked Questions

What is influenza A (H1N1)?

Influenza A (H1N1) – referred to as “swine flu” early on – is a new influenza virus causing illness in people. This new virus was first detected in the United States in April, following an outbreak in Mexico. This virus is spreading person to person in much the same way that regular seasonal influenza viruses spread. This flu is a respiratory disease caused by a type A influenza virus that more normally causes outbreaks of influenza in pigs.

Why is this new H1N1 virus sometimes called "swine flu"?

This virus was originally referred to as “swine flu” because laboratory testing showed that many of the genes in this new virus were very similar to influenza viruses that normally occur in pigs in North America. But further study has shown that this new virus is very different from what normally circulates in North American pigs. It has two genes from flu viruses that normally circulate in pigs in Europe and Asia as well as avian genes and human genes. Scientists call this a “quadruple reassortant” virus.

Can humans pass the flu they've contracted from pigs?

Usually no. But in this case, human-to-human transfers are occurring. This human-to-human transfer is the main criteria for the CDC upgrading the pandemic alert to a stage 4 out of 6.

Why would a new strain be worrisome?

If an influenza virus changes and becomes a new strain against which people have little or no immunity, and this new strain is easily spread from person to person, many people around the world could become ill. Epidemiologists have been saying it's just a matter of time before a new strain of the flu emerges that has the potential to infect millions. Flu pandemics have historically occurred about three times per century and the world hasn't seen one in 40 years.

Is there a vaccine?

There is a vaccine available that can be given to pigs to prevent swine influenza, but there is no vaccine to protect humans from this influenza A (H1N1).

I got the flu shot this year. Am I protected?

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

Can people catch influenza A H1N1 from eating pork?

No. Influenza A (H1N1) is not transmitted by food; you cannot get swine influenza from eating pork or pork products.

What are the symptoms of this flu in humans?

Based on the cases seen in the U.S., symptoms of influenza A (H1N1) are similar to those of the regular flu: sudden onset of fever, coughing, aches and pains, and extreme fatigue. This flu appears to cause diarrhea and vomiting, symptoms that are not usually found in regular flu in adults.

Can we treat this virus in humans?

Yes. This virus appears to be resistant to amantadine and rimantadine, but was susceptible to zanamivir and oseltamivir (Tamiflu).

Have there been swine flu outbreaks before?

Yes. Most notoriously, there was an outbreak in 1976 at Fort Dix, N.J., among military recruits that grabbed big headlines at the time. Worried they had the beginning of a pandemic on their hands, U.S. officials ordered the manufacture of swine flu vaccine and the country launched a mass immunization program that saw about 40 million people vaccinated. But the outbreak didn't turn into a pandemic and went away as mysteriously as it appeared.

Sources: The Canadian Press, Public Health Agency of Canada and the U.S. Centers for Disease Control