

## Patient leaflets from the BMJ Group

# Swine flu

**There's been a lot of alarm about the spread of swine flu, a new type of virus now passing between people. However, there are treatments that can help with symptoms. And there's plenty you can do to protect yourself from catching the virus.**

### What is swine flu?

Swine flu is a type of flu virus which usually infects pigs. But earlier this year a new type began to infect people, probably starting with people who worked with pigs in Mexico and the US. It has been passed from person to person in many countries around the world. It causes an illness very much like seasonal flu.

So far, most of the serious cases have been in Mexico, where a number of people have died. Most cases outside of Mexico have been described as mild.

The virus passes around in the way normal seasonal flu, or colds, pass around - in airborne droplets when people cough or sneeze, and by touching surfaces which have been infected by these droplets.

Doctors classify viruses using numbers and letters. The type of flu we're talking about here is being called novel influenza type A, H1N1. 'Novel' means that it is a new strain, which hasn't been seen in humans before. The reason people worry about a new strain is that people won't have built up immunity to fight it off, and we don't know how widely it will spread, or how badly it will affect people.

### What are the symptoms?

The symptoms of swine flu are similar to those of normal seasonal flu. People get a feverish illness, with a high temperature. They may also have any of the following: cough, runny nose, headache, sore throat, aches and chills. Some people have had vomiting and diarrhoea. Some people have described the symptoms as being like a bad cold, although others have been much more unwell.

If you are concerned you may have swine flu, don't go to the doctor or to hospital. Stay at home and call your health care provider by telephone.

If doctors suspect you may have swine flu, they need to test a sample of mucus to see whether you have the swine flu virus. Doctors have been told to consider swine flu in people with a sudden feverish illness who have sore throat, cough or runny nose. They are warned to be alert if people got ill within seven days of returning from an area with swine flu, or being in contact with someone with swine flu, or live in an area where a case of swine flu has been confirmed.

If you need to give a sample, it will be taken as a swab from your nose and throat. Your doctor may come to take the sample from your home, or you may need to go to a clinic.

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It may take several days to find out whether you have swine flu. During that time, you'll probably be told to stay indoors and avoid direct contact with other people. You are also likely to be given anti-viral medicines.

### What treatments work?

People who are suspected of having swine flu, and their close contacts, are likely to be given anti-viral medicines. Children attending schools where pupils have contracted swine flu have also been given anti-viral medicines, in the hope of slowing the spread of the disease. There are plenty of things you can do to cut your chances of catching the swine flu virus or spreading it around.

### Medicines

Because this is a new strain of flu, it's hard to say what treatments definitely work. There hasn't been time for big, good-quality studies of medicines against this type of flu.

However, this is what we know from the research:

- Laboratory tests show that this type of flu virus is sensitive to two types of anti-viral medicine, **oseltamivir** (Tamiflu) and **zanamivir** (Relenza)
- Both these medicines reduce the amount of time you have symptoms of normal flu by up to a day
- Both medicines reduce your chances of getting complications from normal flu, such as pneumonia or bronchitis
- Studies show both these medicines reduce the chances of getting flu from a close contact (for example someone you live with).

Oseltamivir is a tablet, and zanamivir comes as a spray you breathe in. You take them for five days (to treat flu symptoms) or 10 days (to protect against catching flu). Both may have side effects. Some people taking oseltamivir feel sick or vomit. Zanamivir can cause diarrhoea.

Other types of anti-viral drugs, including **amantadine** and **rimantadine**, don't work against this type of swine flu. There isn't a vaccine against this type of swine flu yet. Normal flu vaccine is not likely to protect against it.

It's important to know that taking these medicines will not stop the spread of swine flu. You will probably still be infectious while taking anti-viral medicines. So you also need to take good hygiene measures, such as avoiding direct contact with people, regularly washing your hands, covering your mouth and nose with a tissue when you cough or sneeze, and throwing tissues away.

### Things you can do for yourself

In addition to taking medicines, there are ways you can make yourself more comfortable if you have flu. Simple painkillers like **paracetamol** can help reduce your temperature and help with aches and pains. You should rest and drink plenty of fluids. Warm drinks can be comforting.

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People can prepare for an outbreak of swine flu by identifying friends or family who could help collect medicines or shopping for them, should they become ill. You could stock up on basic foodstuffs, in case you or your family become ill and can't leave the house.

### Ways to avoid swine flu

The best way to avoid catching swine flu, or spreading it around, is to take sensible hygiene precautions, such as washing your hands regularly. There's good evidence that regular hand-washing (more than four times a day) cuts the spread of illnesses such as flu and the common cold.

These sensible hygiene measures should help prevent the spread of swine flu:

- Cover your nose and mouth when you cough or sneeze, using a tissue where possible
- Dispose of used tissues quickly and sensibly
- Wash your hands often, with hot water and soap
- Clean regularly-touched hard surfaces (for example, door handles and kitchen surfaces) frequently, using normal cleaning products
- Make sure your children follow these hygiene rules.

There's no good evidence that wearing masks will protect you against swine flu. The evidence we found, which comes from the 2003 SARS outbreak, said masks in clinics and hospitals worked well. But it didn't look at wearing masks in everyday life, for example on the street or public transport. Most masks are designed to protect others from the viruses you breathe out, not to protect you from viruses in the air.

There's no need to worry about eating properly-cooked pork. Cooking at 70°C (160°F) kills the swine flu virus, as well as other germs.

### What if I'm pregnant or breastfeeding, or looking after small children?

If you're **pregnant**, it's even more important to try to avoid catching the swine flu virus. Normal seasonal flu can make pregnant women very ill, and can even cause problems like premature birth. We don't know if this virus will cause the same problems, but it doesn't hurt to be cautious.

If you do become ill with flu-like symptoms, drink plenty of fluids. You can also use paracetamol to bring down your fever. You should call your doctor by telephone to see if you need testing for the swine flu virus, or to take anti-viral drugs. There's not much information about the effect of anti-viral drugs on pregnancy. But experts say it is likely to be much less risky than a bad attack of flu.

If you're pregnant and get any of these symptoms while you have flu, you should call for emergency medical help:

- Difficulty breathing
- Pain or pressure in your chest or abdomen
- Sudden dizziness or confusion

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- Severe or long-lasting vomiting
- Decreased or no movement in a baby that was moving previously
- High temperature that doesn't come down when you take paracetamol.

**Breastfeeding** your baby will pass on your body's own immune defences. So you should carry on breastfeeding if you can, even if you get sick. The breast milk will help protect your baby against the virus. You should take care not to cough or sneeze in your baby's face. You may be advised to wear a mask while breastfeeding. You can continue to breastfeed while taking anti-viral medicines.

If you have **children**, it's important to make sure they follow hygiene measures like regular hand-washing and coughing or sneezing into a tissue. Children are often the first to pick up a virus, and this virus has already spread through some schools. For most children, symptoms of swine flu are similar to those in adults, and the disease is not likely to be severe. However, children under five may not get all the usual symptoms, but they may seem lethargic and have trouble breathing.

If your child has flu, and gets any of the following symptoms, call for emergency medical help:

- Fast breathing or trouble breathing
- Bluish or grey skin colour
- Not drinking enough fluids
- Not waking up or not interacting
- Being so irritable that he or she does not want to be held
- Not urinating, or no tears when crying
- Their symptoms improve, but then return with fever and worse cough.

Children can take anti-viral medicines, on the advice of a doctor. Even babies under one year old can take anti-viral medicines if a doctor thinks it is necessary.

### What will happen to me?

Most people who have had swine flu have been treated at home, and recovered in a few days. Some have had only mild symptoms, while others have been more unwell. A few people have had complications, such as pneumonia. Pneumonia is a serious infection of your lungs, which can cause difficulty breathing.

If you have difficulty breathing, or you are getting worse, you should call for medical advice by phone. People with complications such as pneumonia may need to be admitted to hospital. They will probably need additional medicine for secondary infections, which could be caused by bacteria.

Some people have died from swine flu, and nearly all of the deaths have been in Mexico. We don't know why more people have died in Mexico. Remember, people die of seasonal flu every year. We don't yet know whether swine flu will have a bigger effect than normal seasonal flu.

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If you're caring for someone with swine flu, you should be especially careful with hygiene measures. You'll probably need to take anti-viral drugs yourself. The person you are caring for should wear a mask when you are within 2 metres of them in the same room.

People with confirmed swine flu should stay at home for seven days, or for 24 hours after their symptoms have gone, whichever is longer, and avoid direct contact with other people.

### Where to get more help

For more information, see regular updates from the UK's Health Protection Agency at <http://www.hpa.org.uk> and NHS Choices on <http://www.nhs.uk/AlertsEmergencies/Pages/Pandemicflualert.aspx>. The Swine Flu Information Line on 0800 1 513 513 will be updated regularly. If you are in the UK and concerned about swine flu symptoms, call NHS Direct on 0845 4647. There are also regular updates from the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention at <http://www.cdc.gov/h1n1flu>.

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