

Swine Flu

Swine influenza (swine flu) is a respiratory disease of pigs. Swine flu is caused by type A influenza virus, which is the only type of influenza virus to have caused pandemics. Swine flu outbreaks in pigs occur regularly, causing high levels of illness and low death rates. Swine influenza viruses may circulate among swine throughout the year, but most outbreaks occur during the late fall and winter months similar to outbreaks in humans.

Swine flu occasionally infects people without causing large outbreaks. Only twelve cases of swine flu were reported in the United States over the last four years (January 2005 through January 2009). None of them caused deaths.

An outbreak of swine flu occurred among soldiers in Fort Dix, New Jersey, in 1976. At least four soldiers became ill with swine flu and one died; all of these patients had previously been healthy. The virus was transmitted to close contacts in a basic training environment, with limited transmission outside the basic training group. The virus is thought to have circulated for a month and disappeared.

H1N1

Like all influenza viruses, swine flu viruses change constantly. Pigs can be infected by bird and human influenza viruses as well as swine influenza viruses. When influenza viruses from different species infect pigs, the viruses can reassort (that is, swap genes) and new viruses can emerge.

That is what has happened with the recent cases of H1N1. This form of the H1N1 swine flu virus has never been seen before, and it is also causing illness among humans in many countries, including the United States. It is a genetic mixture of viruses from pigs, birds, and people. Because it is a new virus, most people's immune systems do not know how to fight this H1N1 virus. So, many people are susceptible to becoming ill. A variant of H1N1 caused the flu pandemic of 1918.

Symptoms of Swine Flu

The symptoms for swine flu are the same as for seasonal flu. These symptoms include sudden onset of:

- headache
- fever
- chills
- body aches
- sore throat
- non-productive cough
- runny nose

Some people have also reported symptoms of vomiting and diarrhea with swine flu.

When to Seek Medical Help

Most people get over the flu at home by getting plenty of bed rest, drinking lots of fluids, and taking pain relievers to reduce fever and ease body aches. However, there are good reasons to seek medical treatment, such as when symptoms are very severe and quickly worsen. In addition, some people can become extremely ill with swine flu and require hospitalization. Here are some guidelines to help you determine when to seek medical help.

Stay Home

Anyone who is sick should stay home. Sick children and teens should be kept home and not allowed to go to school, to the mall or other public places, or to visit friends. People who are only mildly ill and don't have other medical problems should stay home and rest.

Seek Emergency Medical Help

If you or a child in your household becomes sick and exhibits any of these warning signs, seek emergency medical care immediately.

For children:

- fast breathing or trouble breathing
- bluish skin color
- not drinking enough fluids
- not waking up or not interacting
- being so irritable the child does not want to be held
- fever with a rash
- flu-like symptoms that improve but return with a fever and worse cough

For adults:

- difficulty breathing or shortness of breath
- pain or pressure in the chest or abdomen
- sudden dizziness
- confusion
- severe or consistent vomiting