Ask the experts: What you should know about the H1N1 (swine flu) virus

by Dr. Amy J. Ray and Dr. Robert A. Salata/Case Western Reserve University

Tuesday May 05, 2009, 6:05 PM

H1N1 (sometimes called "swine flu") is a new influenza virus causing illness in people. This virus was first detected in people in April 2009 in the United States.

Other countries, including Mexico and Canada, have reported people sick with this new virus.

This virus is spreading from person-to-person, probably in much the same way that regular seasonal influenza viruses spread.

Not Like Seasonal Flu

Swine flu is more likely to spread through communities of people than the seasonal flu that comes each year for several reasons.

- **Seasonal flu is a human virus** — The seasonal flu virus is a virus that is commonly passed between people - a "human" virus. Because of previous exposure to the seasonal flu, there is some degree of protection that has been built up in the population as a whole.

- **Vaccines increase exposure** — Vaccines to the specific seasonal flu virus that occurs each year give additional protection for each year's virus. Because this virus is completely new to the human population, no natural protection has been built up and no vaccine has been developed.

**Symptoms**

Swine flu is generally mild to moderate in its severity in humans, and is commonly characterized by:

- Cough
- Fever
- Fatigue
- Headache
- Sore throat
- Runny nose
- Chills
- Muscle aches
- Nausea, stomach ache, and diarrhea may also occur

**Talking with your doctor**

Your doctor will decide to test and/or treat for the H1N1 virus ("swine flu") depending on your personal history and symptoms. Your doctor needs as much information as you can offer. Tell your doctor if you have:

This week's NetWellness column is authored by Dr. Amy J. Ray, a clinical instructor at the Case Western Reserve University School of Medicine and Dr. Robert A. Salata, a professor and chief of the Infectious Diseases Division at Case Western Reserve University School of Medicine.

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- Any of the symptoms listed above
- Traveled to a place within the past week where cases have been identified
- Had contact with someone who has been diagnosed as having the H1N1 (“swine flu”) virus
- Know of someone in your community who has been diagnosed with the virus

Diagnosis
Depending on your history and symptoms, here are some of the things your doctor may do:
- Test you for the H1N1 virus
- Test you for the regular seasonal flu virus
- If your symptoms are mild or improving your doctor may have you observed to see if they get worse.

Testing for the H1N1 virus
The doctor will get a sample from your nose, throat or both and may do a “rapid test” as well as a culture which will be sent to the lab.

- Doesn’t Confirm H1N1 - The rapid test confirms only that a virus is present. The rapid test cannot tell for certain that the H1N1 virus is there.
- False Negatives - It is also possible in some cases that the test will be negative even though a person is infected.

To get complete results a sample will be sent to the lab for further testing.

Medications
Treatment for swine flu is available with medications, Tamiflu or Relenza.

Tamiflu is taken by mouth (as a pill or liquid) and Relenza is the same kind of medicine in an inhaled form. It is encouraging to note that these antiviral medications (particularly Tamiflu) are effective in treating this virus, which was not the case in the past human influenza season (2008-2009) where 95% of influenza A strains were Tamiflu resistant.

Both Tamiflu and Relenza are from a particular group called ‘neuraminidase inhibitors.’ The way these medicines work is to ‘inhibit’ the virus particles - stopping them in their tracks - so that they cannot reproduce. While it doesn’t kill the virus (cure the flu) these medicines can make the symptoms less severe, the time of illness shorter and sometimes can prevent people from getting the flu if they come in contact with someone who has it.

Who should be treated preventively?
Sometimes Tamiflu and Relenza will be given to prevent people from being infected with the H1N1 (swine flu) virus. This includes:

- People who live in a household with someone who has been diagnosed with having the virus, especially household members who are children under the age of 5, pregnant women, persons 65 or older, or persons with certain medical conditions such as chronic heart or lung disease.
- Children attending school or daycare who are at high risk for complications on influenza and who had close contact with a confirmed, suspected, or probable case.
- Travelers returning from Mexico.
- First responders who are at a high risk of influenza complications.
- Healthcare workers put at risk while providing clinical care.
- Health care workers at high risk for complications of influenza (certain chronic medical conditions, pregnancy, age greater than 65 years) who are working with confirmed or suspected case.

Stay home if you think you are sick
Influenza is thought to spread mainly person-to-person through coughing or sneezing of infected people. If you get sick with influenza like symptoms such as fever, cough, sore throat, headaches, body aches, the CDC recommends that you stay home from work or school and limit contact with others to avoid spreading infections (including influenza and other respiratory illnesses).

Wearing a mask - What to Do?
If you need to be seen at a healthcare facility, you should mention your symptoms right away at reception or triage and will hopefully be given a mask, especially if you have to spend some time in a waiting area. Ill individuals are
being first advised to not go out.

The area where there is the most concern for influenza spread related to sneezing and coughing is within 6 feet of an infected person.

**Traveling and infection**

On April 30, 2009, the CDC issued the following notices regarding H1N1 Flu (Swine Flu) and Travel:

- **Travel Warning: H1N1 Flu (Swine Flu) and Severe Cases of Respiratory Illness in Mexico -- Avoid Nonessential Travel to Mexico**
- **Risk of H1N1 Flu (Swine Flu) Associated with Travel to Affected Areas**
- **Information for airline passengers exposed to H1N1**

**Avoid getting sick**

- Cover your nose and mouth with a tissue when you cough or sneeze. Throw the tissue in the trash after you use it.
- Wash your hands often with soap and water, especially after you cough or sneeze. Alcohol-based hands cleaners are also effective.
- Avoid touching your eyes, nose or mouth. Germs spread that way.
- Try to avoid close contact with sick people.

**More information**

To learn more, check out the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention website H1N1 Flu (Swine Flu):

- **H1N1 Flu (Swine Flu) and You**
- **What to Do If You Get Flu-Like Symptoms**
- **Interim Guidance for H1N1 Flu (Swine Flu): Taking Care of a Sick Person in Your Home**

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