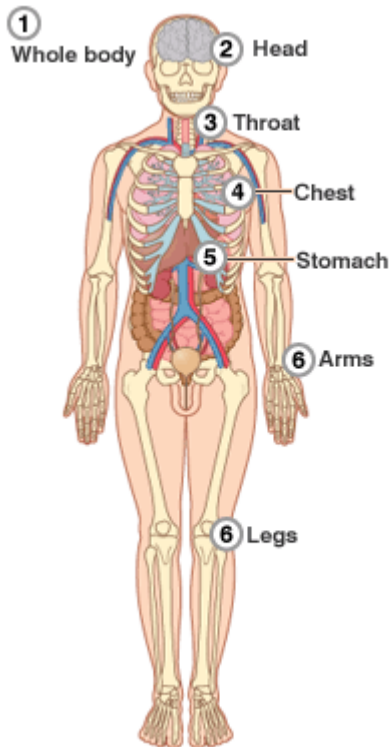


Q&A: Advice about swine flu

Source BBC News Website

Swine flu has spread across the world since emerging in Mexico and is now officially the first flu pandemic for 40 years. Experts fear millions of people will be infected.

What is swine flu and what are the symptoms?



SWINE FLU SYMPTOMS

1. High temperature, tiredness and lowered immunity
2. Headache, runny nose and sneezing
3. Sore throat
4. Shortness of breath
5. Loss of appetite, vomiting and diarrhoea
6. Aching muscles, limb and joint pain

Source: NHS

Swine flu is a respiratory disease, caused by a strain of the influenza type A virus known as H1N1.

H1N1 is the same strain which causes seasonal outbreaks of flu in humans on a regular basis.

But this latest version of H1N1 is different: it contains genetic material that is typically found in strains of the virus that affect humans, birds and swine.

Although the strain may have originated in pigs, it is now a wholly human disease.

It can be spread from person to person by coughing and sneezing.

Symptoms of swine flu in humans appear to be similar to those produced by standard, seasonal flu.

A fever - which is a temperature of 38°C (100.4°F) - is the key symptom, combined with other complaints which may include a cough, sore throat, body aches, chills and aching limbs. Some people with the virus have also reported nausea and diarrhoea.

As with normal flu, the severity of symptoms will depend on treatment and the individual. Many people have only suffered mildly and have begun to recover within a week.

People are most infectious soon after they develop symptoms, but they cease to be a risk once those symptoms have disappeared. The incubation period may be as little as two days.

Apparently healthy people are dying from the virus. Does that mean it is getting worse?

Experts say this does not change anything, and that if anything it is surprising that it has taken this long in the UK for someone without underlying health problems to die.

THE AT RISK GROUPS

- People with lung disease
- People with heart disease
- People with kidney disease
- People with diabetes
- Those with immunosuppression problems either because of treatment or disease
- Patients who have had drug treatment for asthma
- Pregnant women
- Children under five

Apparently healthy people can die of any flu-related virus if it causes complications such as pneumonia so these latest deaths do not give any extra cause for concern.

Indeed, so far, many people who have developed symptoms of infection have not needed drugs to make a full recovery, according to the WHO. Flu expert Professor Peter Openshaw, of Imperial College London, says about one in every three people who become infected will not realise they have had swine flu because they will have had no or only very few symptoms.

"About 98% of people who get infected will recover fully without any hospital treatment so I think the public needs to be reassured."

The real fear is that the strain will mutate and become more virulent which would pose a greater threat. This has been the feature of previous flu pandemics. But this has not yet happened - and in any event it is worth remembering that seasonal flu often poses a serious threat to public

health - each year it kills 250,000 - 500,000 around the world.

What should I do if I think I have it?

Anyone with flu-like symptoms who suspects they might have the swine flu virus are being advised to stay at home and use the "swine flu symptom checker" on the NHS Direct website, or phone NHS Direct - NHS 24 in Scotland.

If swine flu is suspected, your GP should be contacted - and he or she will issue a voucher for anti-flu drugs.

The infected person would then be expected to arrange for a friend or family member to pick up the anti-viral treatment for them from a collection point, most probably a pharmacy.

In the initial phase of the outbreak, lab testing was done to diagnose the flu but this is no longer happening routinely.

How is it treated?

Two drugs commonly used to treat flu, Tamiflu and Relenza, are effective at treating infection. However, the drugs must be administered at an early stage to be effective. Use of these drugs may also make it less likely that infected people will pass the virus on to others.

The UK government already has a [stockpile of Tamiflu](#), ordered as a precaution against a pandemic.

However, there is concern that if too many people start taking anti-virals as a precaution, it could raise the risk of the virus developing resistance, reducing the drugs' effectiveness. There is however no evidence at present that this is happening.

In any event there is little point taking these drugs as a precaution as each tablet only provides a day's worth of cover. Given that the virus may be with us for many months - or indeed years - taking a regular pill is ill-advised as the long-term side effects are not known.

What measures then can I take to prevent infection?

As yet there is no vaccine, but manufacturers are trying to develop one. Good progress is being made and the first doses may be available in the UK by August. However the NHS says it may be next year before everyone can be immunised.

Older people and those under 16 - as well as health workers and those with existing clinical conditions - will be given priority.

It is hoped that even if the virus mutates in coming months, the vaccine would still confer a high degree of protection against related strains.

In the meantime, avoid close contact with people who appear unwell and who have fever and cough.

General infection control practices and good hygiene can help to reduce transmission of all viruses, including the human swine influenza.

This includes covering your nose and mouth when coughing or sneezing, using a tissue when possible and disposing of it promptly.

It is also important to wash your hands frequently with soap and water to reduce the spread of the virus from your hands to face or to other people, and cleaning hard surfaces like door handles frequently using a normal cleaning product.

In Mexico masks have been handed out to the general public, but experts are sceptical about how useful this is. Some suggest it may even be counterproductive.

Where can I get further advice?

Further information and advice on swine flu can be found at websites of leading health and research organisations around the world. The [World Health Organisation](#) gives background information on the virus.

The UK's government services [website](#) is carrying regularly updated health and travel information. The [Health Protection Agency](#) advises the public about what to do if returning from an affected area. [NHS Choices](#) outlines how swine flu is different from other flu.

The [European Centre for Disease Prevention and Control](#) is another good source of information.

The US government's [Centers for Disease Control and Prevention](#) is counting the number of cases in the US.

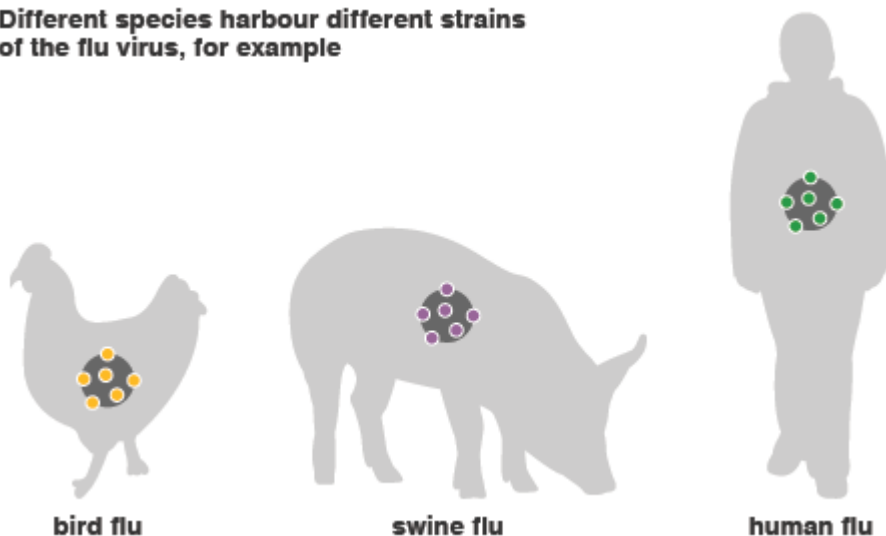
You can also track spread of swine flu reports using unofficial sources. Google is mapping search term data as an indicator of flu activity both across the US down to state level and in Mexico. Healthmaps maps viruses using news reports. Social media guide Mashable lists a range of ways to track the virus .

Information and links to [useful websites](#) are being shared on [Twitter](#), the micro-blogging service, while social networking website [Facebook](#) is [tracking swine flu discussion amongst users](#).

And the BBC's medical correspondent, Fergus Walsh, is [filing regular entries on his blog on H1N1](#).

HOW SWINE FLU OUTBREAK EMERGED

Different species harbour different strains of the flu virus, for example



Flu viruses mutate over time causing small changes to proteins on their surface called antigens. If the immune system has met a particular strain of the virus before, it is likely to have some immunity; but if the antigens are new to the immune system, it will be weakened.