

Swine Influenza – Frequently Asked Questions

Q. Just what IS swine flu?

A. Pigs spread their own strains of influenza and every so often people catch one, usually after contact with the animals. This new strain is a mix of pig viruses with some human and bird viruses.

Q. How easy is it to catch this virus?

A. Scientists don't yet know if it takes fairly close or prolonged contact with someone who's sick, or if it's more easily spread. But, in general, flu viruses spread thru uncovered coughs and sneezes or - **and this is important:** by touching your mouth or nose or eyes with unwashed hands. Flu viruses can live on surfaces for several hours, like a doorknob just touched by someone who sneezed into his hand.

Q. In Mexico, officials are handing out face masks. Do I need one?

A. The Center for Disease Control says there's not good evidence that masks really help outside of healthcare settings. It's safer just to avoid close contact with someone who's sick, and avoid crowded gatherings in places where swine flu is known to be spreading. But if you can't do that, CDC guidelines say it's OK to consider a mask – just **don't let it substitute for good precautions**. You may also want to consider masking the ill person, instead of everyone else.

Q. Can I still eat pork and pork products?

A. The World Health Organization (WHO) says "yes." First, swine influenza viruses don't spread thru food. Second, properly-handled and prepared pork and other products derived from pigs has not been show to be transmissible to people through eating, and the swine influenza virus is killed by cooking temps of 160 F, which corresponds to the general guidance for the preparations of pork and other meat.

Q. What about the pandemic thing? Are we on our way?

A. Most health officials say that this virus is not yet fully adapted to humans – meaning it is being transmitted from one human to another- which is not typical for these kinds of flu, but not on a broad scale and slower than usual for this type of thing. They're guessing from this that it would take 2 to 3 years to evolve to that level, leaving plenty of time to develop a vaccine. (And, these days it really only takes a few months to produce vaccines.)

Q. But what if I get it now?

A. First and quite comforting is the fact that of the reported cases in the U.S., **most have had mild cases and recovered fully from the disease without requiring medical attention and without viral remedies**. If a viral remedy is needed, Tamiflu, an anti-virus that is effective against the swine flu, is in plentiful supply and has been made available across the U.S.

Q. Should I take Tamiflu as a precaution if I'm not sick yet?

A. NO. Overusing antiviral drugs can help germs become resistant to them.

Q. How big is my risk?

A. For most people, very low. Outside of Mexico, so far clusters of illness seem related to Mexico travel. (New York's cluster, for example, consists of students and family members at one school where some students came back ill from spring break in Mexico.)

Q. How can I protect myself and my family from getting swine flu?

A. First, know that the majority of the people infected have been infected thru prolonged and close contact with pigs. (If that is true for you, good hygiene practices are essential in all contact with animals, and especially important during slaughter and post-slaughter handling. And sick animals should never enter the process.)

For the rest of us right now, take common sense precautions. See and heed the other hand-outs for pointers. In addition, get adequate sleep, eat nutritious food, and keep physically active. If someone is ill at home, in addition to the hand-out pointers, try to provide a separate section for them as they recover, if possible, try to improve the air flow in the area where the ill person stays, and keep the environment clean.