

## Swine Flu: Facts and Prevention Tips

The recent outbreak of swine flu in Mexico and the United States is of great concern to the World Health Organization ([www.who.int/en/](http://www.who.int/en/)) and the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention ([www.cdc.gov](http://www.cdc.gov)). On Sunday, April 26, 2009, the federal government declared the illness a public health emergency.

Swine flu is a respiratory virus that typically occurs in pigs. Like the many forms of influenza virus that occur in humans, it mutates constantly, creating new strains, and can sometimes be transmitted to human beings who have close contact with the animals (such as farm workers). The strain that is causing the outbreak in Mexico and the U.S. (called swine influenza A or H1N1) has mutated so that it can now be transmitted from person to person. Symptoms associated with swine flu include:

- Fever
- Lethargy and lack of appetite
- Coughing
- Nasal congestion
- Sore throat
- Nausea, vomiting, or diarrhea

While the initial source of this outbreak appears to be Mexico, multiple countries are now reporting confirmed cases, including the United States and Canada. Some of the confirmed cases have been mild, but others have resulted in serious illness and death. Given the nature of international travel, flu can spread rapidly throughout the globe in a relatively short period of time.

Health officials are concerned about the potential for worldwide spread of the illness (also called “pandemic”) because this strain is new to humans. As a result,



the flu shots that were issued over the winter provide no immunity to the illness. In addition, the virus appears to be resistant to some of the antiviral drugs that are typically used to treat the flu. The number of young, seemingly healthy people who have been affected by the illness in Mexico is also cause for concern as the typical flu virus is rarely fatal except in the elderly or those with weakened immune systems.

The CDC’s recommendation for avoiding swine flu is to take standard flu season precautions. These include:

- **Avoid touching your eyes, nose, or mouth.** Person to person transmission of a virus can result from touching another person, then absorbing the germs into yourself.
- **Wash your hands frequently.** Use warm water and soap (if no warm water, use alcohol-based soap) and rub vigorously for at least 30 seconds.
- **Keep hand sanitizers in your car or purse.** Use after handling money, touching items that others also use (such as a gas pump), and before eating restaurant food.

- **Eat healthy.** Eating foods rich in vitamins A, C, and E will strengthen your immune system. Try to start each day with a healthy breakfast.
- **Take vitamins and supplements.** A good multi-vitamin can help strengthen your immune system, as can drinking green tea.
- **Drink at least eight glasses of water per day.** Water flushes out your system and keeps you hydrated.
- **Practice stress management.** Too much stress can weaken your immune system. Exercise and find ways to relax, such as listening to soothing music, meditating, practicing yoga, reading, or watching a comedy show.
- **Get plenty of rest.** Adults need at least seven hours of sleep per night, children more. Insufficient rest increases your chances of getting sick.
- **Don't share drinking containers.** Shared drinking containers spread germs fast. Use disposable paper cups in the bathroom, and wash water bottles before refilling them.
- **Use a separate set of towels for each family member.** Give everyone a different color or pattern.
- **Disinfect.** Clean doorknobs, phones, computer keyboards, bathroom sinks, kitchen counters, and any other items that are frequently shared.
- **Wash your child's toys with**

**soap and water regularly,** especially if he or she tends to chew on them.

- **Avoid party dips and food trays that do not contain utensils.** Others may have touched the food with their hands but not taken it, or you may have had a chip double-dipper in front of you.
- **Keep a scarf or mask over your nose and mouth.** If you are worried about the spread of germs, you may want to keep your face covered in crowded public places.
- **Stop smoking.** Smoking kills cilia — the fibers in your nose and lungs that prevent mucus from clogging these airways.

**Please note:** You cannot get the swine flu by eating pork or ham. Like other forms of flu, swine flu is a respiratory illness that is transmitted by person to person contact.

If you or a family member come down with flu-like symptoms, it is recommended that you take the following steps to care for yourself and prevent the spread of the illness.

- **Stay home.** While it may be difficult to miss time at work or school, keep in mind that being out in public when you are contagious increases the odds that others will get sick. *The CDC is requesting that anyone with flu symptoms isolate themselves by staying at home, even if they are only experiencing mild symptoms.*
- **Cover your nose and mouth with a tissue when you cough**

**or sneeze.** Throw tissues away immediately after use.

- **Wash your hands after blowing your nose or coughing.** Make this a consistent habit to avoid spreading germs.
- **Don't share a bed with another person if you are sick.** Wash bedding and blankets after the sick person recovers.
- **Spray garbage cans with disinfectant** to kill germs and keep those who handle the garbage from getting sick.

### **When to Seek Medical Attention**

If you are experiencing flu symptoms (especially if you live in an area where swine flu has been reported), contact your health care provider. He or she will determine if you need to come in for testing for swine flu.

Flu symptoms that indicate an urgent need for medical attention (regardless of what form of the illness you have) include:

- Difficulty breathing
- Discomfort or pressure in the abdomen or chest
- Dizziness
- Confusion
- Persistent or severe vomiting

Children who are ill need immediate attention if they:

- Have a bluish skin color
- Refuse liquids

- Are irritable and refuse to be held
- Have a fever with a rash
- Can't wake up or are lethargic or unresponsive

When in doubt, contact your physician.

The scope of the swine flu outbreak is still being determined. Until more information is available, it's best to stay calm and take appropriate precautions to prevent illness. If you are feeling worried because of the news about swine flu, contact LifeMatters for assistance.

*The above information is intended for educational purposes only and is not intended to take the place of medical advice or the instructions of federal or local authorities.*

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