

Influenza A (H1N1) – A New Influenza Virus Frequently Asked Questions

1. What is Influenza A (H1N1)?

Influenza A (H1N1) is a new influenza virus of swine origin that was first detected in humans in April 2009 in Mexico.

The virus is infecting people and is spreading from person-to-person. This has sparked a growing outbreak of illness in North America and an increasing number of cases are being reported in other parts of the world.

On April 29 the World Health Organization (WHO) raised its pandemic influenza alert to phase 5.

As of May 29, 2009, 53 countries officially reported 15,510 cases of influenza A (H1N1) infection, including 99 deaths

2. Why is the World Health Organization (WHO) so worried about this pandemic possibility?

Seasonal epidemics occur every year and doctors worldwide are able to treat the viruses with seasonal vaccines. A pandemic is a worldwide epidemic. The influenza A (H1N1) is a new virus and one to which the populations will have no immunity.

3. Why is this new H1N1 virus sometimes called the Swine Flu?

The virus was originally referred to as “swine flu” because laboratory testing showed that many of the genes in this new virus were very similar to influenza viruses that normally occur in pigs in North America. But further studies have shown that this new virus contains genes from swine, avian, and human influenza viruses. Scientists call this a “quadruple reassortant” virus.

4. Do pigs carry this virus and can people catch this virus from a pig?

At this time, there is no evidence that pigs are infected with this new virus. Hence there is no confirmation of transmission between pigs and humans at this point. However, there are flu viruses that commonly cause outbreaks of illness in pigs. Most of the time, these viruses do not infect people, but influenza viruses can spread back and forth between pigs and people.

5. How do people become infected with Influenza A (H1N1)?

It is thought that this new virus is spreading in much the same way that regular seasonal influenza viruses spread. When infected people cough or sneeze, infected droplets get on their hands, drop onto surfaces, or are dispersed into the air. Another person can breathe in the contaminated air, or touch infected hands or surfaces, and be exposed.

6. What are the signs and symptoms of the infection?

Early signs of influenza A (H1N1) are similar to those of the seasonal human flu – these include fever, cough, headache, muscle and joint pain, sore throat and runny nose. A significant number of people who have been infected with this virus also had vomiting and diarrhoea.

Like the seasonal influenza, severe illnesses and death has occurred as a result of illness associated with this virus.

7. How severe is the illness associated with this new virus?

It is uncertain at this time how severe this virus will be in terms of illness and death compared with other influenza viruses. As it is a new type of virus, there are still on-going studies to determine how deadly this new virus is, and whether some people may be at greater risk from infection or serious illness and related complications. However, there is some emerging information to suggest that Influenza A (H1N1) seems milder than originally feared.

8. How long can an infected person spread this virus to others?

At the current time, it is believed that people infected with this new virus may be contagious from 1 day before they develop symptoms to up to 7 days after the symptoms start. Children, especially younger ones, may potentially be contagious for longer periods (10 days or more).

9. How can human infections with Influenza A (H1N1) be diagnosed?

To diagnose this infection, a respiratory specimen would generally need to be collected within the first 4 to 5 days of illness and sent to a laboratory for DNA testing or culture. Currently testing for influenza A (H1N1) in Singapore is only available from the Communicable Disease Centre of the Tan Tock Seng Hospital.

10. What medications are available to treat the Influenza A (H1N1) infection in humans?

Recommendations for the use of antiviral medications may change depending on the situation and data on antiviral susceptibilities.

Currently, the two anti-viral medications that are recommended for treatment of a confirmed, probable or suspected case of influenza A (H1N1) infection are oseltamivir ("Tamiflu") and zanamivir ("Relenza"). For clinical benefit, treatment should be started as soon as possible from the onset of illness.

These medications can also be used to prevent influenza in those with close contact of a confirmed or probable case. The Singapore government has a stockpile of medication that will become available if this new virus circulates in Singapore. It is likely that the highest priority will be given to those at high risk of complications from influenza (i.e. the elderly, young children, pregnant women, and people with chronic medical conditions).

11. How is the International Medical Clinic addressing the Influenza A (H1N1)?

International Medical Clinic (IMC) is closely monitoring information available from the Singapore Ministry of Health (MOH) and will continue to take appropriate precautionary measures. IMC has protocols in place to protect our staff and our patients. These protocols will be progressively updated as events develop.

According to the MOH requirements, we are currently screening patients over the phone as well as those who visit our clinics. Where required, we will isolate anyone who presents with fever, flu like symptoms and cough, from our other patients.

12. Does IMC stock Tamiflu?

Currently we do not have any stock of Tamiflu. However, we are able to write prescriptions of Tamiflu for our patients but we are unable to confirm the product availability in the local pharmacies.

In order to obtain a prescription for Tamiflu, a consultation with one of our doctors is required to better understand the proper usage and health indications.

Please refer to the link on IMC's website regarding our Statement on Tamiflu for more information.

13. What is the situation in Singapore?

As of May 31, 2009, there are 5 human cases of influenza A (H1N1) in Singapore. All the 5 patients have relatively mild symptoms and are doing well, and are expected to recover uneventfully.

All their close contacts on Home Quarantine Order are also reported to be well and have been given Tamiflu as chemoprophylaxis.

The Ministry of Health (MOH) has an influenza pandemic preparedness plan in response to a pandemic situation. The Disease Outbreak Response System Alert status is now in Yellow. Precautionary measures such as border controls, detection & isolation of suspect cases and Home Quarantine Orders, as well as contact tracing of the close contacts of confirmed cases are in full swing to prevent the virus from spreading like “wild fire” within Singapore. However, it may be just a matter of time before the spread within the local community becomes inevitable. This is because despite all the containment measures, one-third of those with the infection may have no symptoms.

According to the Health Minister, MOH may not raise the alert level even if the virus starts circulating within the community, as long as the viral infection remains mild. The health ministry has also assembled a key team of scientists to study the viral samples from the affected cases here, and will track these samples over time for mutations. The aim of the study is to monitor the nature of the virus to assess if it stays mild or if it mutates into a deadly form. This will then ascertain the MOH's decision to scale or down the precautionary measures as necessary.

14. Is it safe to visit countries with cases of Influenza A (H1N1) virus and will I be quarantined when you return? What travel precautions should I take?

The local authorities have issued a travel advisory that advises members of the public to exercise caution over travel to affected areas.

In the event that travel is unavoidable, you should take note of the following measures to minimize your risk of acquiring swine flu:

- * Avoid contact with persons with symptoms of influenza.
- * Avoid crowded areas and maintain good ventilation.
- * Observe good personal and environmental hygiene. Wash hands thoroughly with soap and water frequently, and particularly when respiratory secretions e.g. after sneezing contaminate them.
- * Maintain good body resistance through a balanced diet, regular exercise, having adequate rest & fluids, reducing stress and not smoking.

Upon returning from an affected area, you should continue to maintain high standards of personal hygiene and to monitor your own health.

15. What should I do if I am sick with flu symptoms?

If you develop a fever (temperature > 38°C) and respiratory symptoms within 7 days of travel to an affected area or within 7 days of close contact with a person with confirmed or probable influenza A (H1N1) infection, please call your doctor or call 993 for a dedicated ambulance to take you to Tan Tock Seng Hospital for evaluation.

If you feel unwell with mild flu-like symptoms but with no history of travel or no close contact with people with confirmed or probable influenza A (H1N1), the following precautions should be taken:

- Stay at home and keep away from work, school or crowds

- Rest & take plenty of fluids
- Cover your mouth and nose with disposable tissues when coughing and sneezing, and dispose of the used tissues properly
- Wash hands with soap and water often and thoroughly, especially after coughing and sneezing
- Inform family and friends about your illness and try to avoid contact with other people
- Seek medical attention early if your symptoms worsen or if you are unsure about your condition.

16. What should I do if I fall ill while traveling?

You should seek immediate medical attention from a local doctor and refrain from traveling until you are certified fit by the doctor.

17. Is there an effective vaccine already available against the new influenza A (H1N1) virus?

No, but work is already under way to develop such a vaccine. Since this is a new strain of the influenza virus, it may take 5-6 months to make a new vaccine that will protect as well as possible against this virus.

18. Will the currently available seasonal vaccine provide protection against influenza A (H1N1)?

No. Although the seasonal influenza vaccine is unlikely to protect against this new virus, it will be helpful in the prevention of the regular flu, which can be confused with the influenza A (H1N1).

19. Is it safe to eat pork?

There is currently no evidence to suggest that influenza A (H1N1) virus can be transmitted to humans from eating pork or pork products that have been thoroughly cooked.

20. Does IMC sell face masks?

We do not currently sell facemasks, as it is paramount for us to maintain adequate stocks of such infection control items for our staff and for those patients that are required to wear a mask. We recommend that you buy surgical masks from a pharmacy.

For updates on this evolving issue, please refer to the following websites:

www.moh.gov.sg

www.cdc.gov

www.who.int

www.traveldoctor.com.au

Sources: Singapore Ministry of Health, World Health Organization & Centers for Disease Control & Prevention

This information is provided for patients of International Medical Clinic or upon request only.

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