



Swine Flu: To Panic or Not, That is the Question

Thanks to the 24-hour media coverage about swine flu, we're all aware that a potential flu pandemic could be nigh. But before you stock up on facemasks and hand sanitizer, it's important to put some things in perspective.

William Sutker, MD, chief of infectious diseases at Baylor University Medical Center at Dallas, says that first and foremost, we should remain calm. "As of now, there is no need for people to panic. So far, there have been very few cases reported," says Sutker. "At this point, it is unclear if the swine flu outbreak will develop into a full blown pandemic."

Although there are many myths and misconceptions floating around, Sutker says the facts about swine flu are these:

- Swine flu or H1N1, is a particular strain of Type A flu (Type A and Type B are the usual strains seen every year). Swine flu is typically associated with pigs and usually contracted by those who have close contact with the animals. However, this strain can be spread from person to person.
- Swine flu is treatable. "Although the type of flu we saw this season was not sensitive to some of the common antivirals that were available, swine flu is," says Sutker. He says it can be treated with Tamiflu and Relenza, available by prescription. However, Sutker adds that these medications should be used carefully as overuse could lead to drug-resistant strains of the virus.
- So far, 40 people in the United States have been diagnosed with swine flu. In comparison, anywhere from 5 to 20 percent of the population in the United States is diagnosed with human strains of the flu every year, according to the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC).
- The symptoms of swine flu are mild. Although the symptoms for swine flu are similar to those of the regular flu, such as fever, chills, body aches and coughing, they are no worse than regular flu symptoms. "However, there seems to be an increase in nausea and vomiting amongst those infected with swine flu. Again, these symptoms can be associated with regular strains of the flu as well."
- You cannot get swine flu from pork products. According to the U.S. Department of Agriculture scientists you cannot catch swine flu from food products.

Sutker adds that the most powerful weapon in our defense against swine flu is basic flu prevention protocol. Just like any other strain of the flu, swine flu is spread by coughing, sneezing, etc. so in order to protect yourself—or to avoid spreading it if you are infected—practice good respiratory etiquette. Follow these tips:

- Wash your hands. "Hand hygiene cannot be stressed enough," advises Sutker. "Wash your hands regularly with soap and water or an alcohol-based sanitizer. As always, this is the single most important prevention technique that we have available."
- Cover your cough or sneeze. "Flu, like any other contagious respiratory disease, is spread by contact with infected droplets such as those released during a cough or sneeze." Cough or sneeze into a tissue and throw it away. If you don't have a tissue, use your shirtsleeve or hand, but make sure to wash your hands thoroughly afterwards.
- Avoid public places if you have been exposed. "Any crowded area is the last place you should be if you think you have been exposed," says Sutker. "Do your friends, family and co-workers a favor and stay home. You will not only spare them becoming infected too, but you'll need the rest in order to get better."
- If you think you are infected, see your doctor. "We are advising people to avoid going to their local emergency room if they are feeling sick as they can easily become overwhelmed," adds Sutker. "Instead, make an appointment to see your family physician so they can start treatment immediately."