

## SWINE FLU

By Sofia Khan, M.D., FAAP

The influenza virus causes an infection of the nose, throat and lungs. This infection causes illnesses, hospitalizations and deaths each year.

There are many different flu viruses. Novel H1N1 flu virus or “swine flu” virus is a new and different influenza virus. Therefore the vaccine that protects against the common flu does not protect from novel H1N1 (swine flu).

The virus is called “swine flu” because it has many genes similar to the flu viruses found in pigs. However, novel H1N1 (swine flu) virus has not been detected in pigs in the U.S. – only in humans so far.

### **Person to Person Spread:**

Swine flu is contagious i.e. very easily transferred from person to person through coughing/sneezing (droplets from the nose and mouth). Since this virus can stay alive on hard surfaces, like table tops and door knobs for almost 6 hours, touching these surfaces and then your own nose, mouth, or eyes can also be a way to transmit the virus. All surfaces like bedside tables, bathroom and kitchen counters, door handles, etc., should be wiped clean with household disinfectants, periodically. Toys, cups, dishes and flatware should be washed in warm soapy water and when possible disposable products can also be used.

To further minimize the spread of the virus, if you have flu-like symptoms (fever, cough, and/or runny nose), you should “cover your cough” and “wash your hands”. To “cover your cough” a tissue can be used, and after coughing or sneezing it should be thrown away in the trash. You can also “cover your cough” by sneezing or coughing into your arm crease at the elbow.

Wearing a disposable mask should be considered if the person suffering from flu symptoms lives with or cares for an infant or a person with high risk of developing complications. All body fluids (saliva, vomit & diarrhea) of a person ill with the flu virus should be considered contagious. Therefore, a thorough hand washing with soap and water should be practiced after exposure to any secretions from the sick person.

In flu season, when possible, you should stay about 5 to 6 feet away from a sick person who is sneezing or coughing. This helps prevent airborne transmission of the virus. A child with flu symptoms should not be in school or daycare. A child may return to school, once the symptoms subside and the body temperature remains less than 100 degrees Fahrenheit for at least 24 hours; without the use of any fever reducing medicine.

### **Protection and Prevention:**

Every year scientists prepare flu vaccines to help protect and fight the expected strains of the common flu. The vaccine for the common flu is highly recommended, and is an effective tool for protection from the seasonal flu virus.

The seasonal flu vaccine, however, does not protect against the novel H1N1 or Swine Flu virus. A vaccine for the swine flu is expected to be available in the month of October. This will be an important tool to protect you and your family from the “swine flu”.

## **Treatment:**

Most people do not need any medications to fully recover from the flu. Over the counter treatments should be targeted to alleviate symptoms and prevent complications.

Symptoms of fever and sore throat can be helped by non-aspirin containing products like Motrin, Advil (ibuprofen) or Tylenol (acetaminophen) as per directions. Some over the counter cold medications already contain acetaminophen or ibuprofen, so check the ingredients on the package label before taking additional doses of these medications, to avoid over dose. Aspirin or aspirin-containing products such as Pepto Bismol should NOT be given to any child 18 years old and younger with a confirmed or suspected case of the virus, due to the risk Reye Syndrome.

For cough and congestion, your pediatrician can advise, depending on your child's age and severity of symptoms. Children younger than 4 years of age should not be given over the counter cold medications without a healthcare provider's advice. The safest care for children with flu-like symptoms who are younger than 2 years of age is to use saline drops in the nose and a suction bulb to help clear away mucus in the nose.

In some cases, your pediatrician may decide to use antiviral drugs. In general, these drugs should only be used if a person is very sick with symptoms or "close to hospitalization" or is considered "high risk" for complications from the virus.

Patients that are considered "high risk" are those who are more likely to develop the complications of the virus, due to an underlying condition or age. Those factors which can be considered high risk are:

- children less than 5, especially less than 2yrs of age,
- moderate to severe asthma or other chronic airway issues
- unstable or uncompensated heart conditions
- sickle cell disease
- neurologic muscle weakness
- diabetes
- immune systems disorders or patients who are immune-suppressed with medicines

In summary, swine flu symptoms in healthy children are very similar to those of the common or seasonal flu. Swine flu, just like the common flu is usually a self-limiting illness, i.e. it gets better on it's own with time.

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