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Swine Flu

H1N1 strain of the influenza virus causes swine flu. The world health organization has already called it a pandemic with an alert level six- the highest possible and the worst since 1968. According to CDC an estimated one million people have had swine flu in this country until now. Nearly 9000 people have needed hospitalizations. Over 550 patients have died as a result.

What are the symptoms to look for?

Swine flu causes illness similar to seasonal flu and includes fever, cough, sore throat, runny or stuffy nose, body aches, headache, chills and fatigue. A significant number of people also have diarrhea and vomiting. The following categories of people are at higher risk for serious complications from swine flu. They include those who are 65 years and older, children younger than 5 years old, pregnant women, people of any age with chronic medical conditions (such as asthma, diabetes, or heart disease), and people who's immune system is suppressed from medications, cancer, HIV and other types of immunodeficiency.

How do you protect from swine flu?

Center for Disease Control (CDC) and American Academy of Allergy, Asthma and Immunology (AAAAI) have come up with the following guidelines to help prevent further spread of the virus.

1. Clean your hands often. Hand washing with soap and water for at least 20 seconds after touching objects, surfaces or another person's hands can physically remove influenza viruses. Alcohol-based hand cleaners can also prevent the spread of germs.
2. Cover your nose and mouth with a tissue when you cough. Clean your hands with soap and water or an alcohol-based hand cleanser afterward.
3. Limit your exposure (even brief contact) to people with flu symptoms, especially during the first several days of their illness. People with influenza should be considered contagious as long as they are symptomatic and possibly for up to seven days and more following the onset of symptoms.

4. Don't touch your face, especially your eyes and nose after touching something that is contaminated by someone with the virus. Viruses may remain active on surfaces for two hours and possibly longer.
5. Routinely clean and disinfect. Remember disinfecting destroys germs, whereas simple cleaning may not. Follow instructions for all disinfectants. Use a paper towel to turn off sink water faucets.
6. Stay home when you are infected with the flu virus unless you need to seek medical care.
7. Influenza viruses may make your asthma worse, so be sure you have an updated action plan from your allergist or asthma specialist and take your medications regularly.
8. Patients under 18 years old should not take aspirin or aspirin-containing products if they have the flu.
9. Get help immediately if you have: difficulty breathing or chest pain, purple or blue discolored lips, vomiting, dehydration, seizures, or become confused or less responsive than normal.

Swine flu vaccine

Regular flu vaccine and vaccine for swine flu will be available this fall. It is important to know that regular flu vaccine will not protect against swine flu. You need to take both vaccines and they can be taken on the same day. Do not take the vaccines and discuss with your doctor first if you are allergic to eggs, have had severe allergic or adverse reaction from previous vaccinations or if you are moderately or severely ill.

Swine flu vaccine is suggested for pregnant women, people who live with or care for children younger than 6 months of age, healthcare and emergency medical services personnel, anyone between the ages of 6 months and 24 years old, and people with ages of 25 through 64 years old who are at higher risk for 2009 H1N1 because of chronic health disorders or compromised immune systems. The vaccine will be available in vaccination clinics organized by local health departments, healthcare provider offices, schools, and other private settings, such as pharmacies and workplaces. Antiviral drugs are also available to treat swine flu. These drugs can make your illness milder and make you feel better faster. They may also prevent serious flu complications.

About the author:

Natarajan Asokan, M.D., F.A.A.P. is a board certified allergist and immunologist and a board certified pediatrician with over 25 years of experience as a physician and 9 years of experience as a practicing allergist & immunologist. He treats adults and children with various allergy & immunology problems. He can be reached at 1739, Beverly Ave, Suite 118, Kingman, AZ 86409, Tel: 928-681-5800, Fax: 928-681-5801, or www.trinityallergy.com

