

## Human Influenza Pandemic

Influenza (flu) is a familiar infection in the UK, especially in the winter months. The illness caused by the flu virus can be mild or severe, and can at times lead to death. Some groups of people – older people, young children and people with certain health conditions – are generally more susceptible to flu, and each year people in those groups are encouraged to have a flu vaccination. Pandemic flu is different from ordinary flu as it occurs when a new flu virus emerges into the human population and spreads readily and rapidly from person to person worldwide. As it is a new virus, no-one has any immunity to it and a suitable vaccine available will not be available until the Autumn. Everyone is susceptible, healthy adults and children as well as those most susceptible to normal 'seasonal' flu. In comparison with seasonal flu, many more people could become severely ill, and many more could die.

## Symptoms of Swine Flu

It is important that as swine flu spreads, you know the symptoms of the disease so you can recognise it in yourself and others at an early stage. Please read this page and consider your symptoms carefully before using the National Pandemic Flu Service mentioned below.

So far, most swine flu cases have been mild, with symptoms similar to those of seasonal flu. Only a small number of people have had more serious symptoms.

If you or a member of your family has any of the following symptoms and a temperature of 38°C or above, you may have swine flu.

The typical symptoms are:

- a sudden fever (a high body temperature of 38°C/100.4°F or above), and
- a sudden cough.

Other symptoms may include:

- headache,
- tiredness,
- chills,
- aching muscles,
- limb or joint pain,
- diarrhoea or stomach upset,
- sore throat,
- runny nose,
- sneezing, or
- loss of appetite.

## Checking symptoms

It makes sense to have a working thermometer at home, as an increase in temperature is one of the main symptoms. If you are unsure how to use a thermometer, read the guidance below.

### How do I take someone's temperature?

You can use a thermometer to quickly and easily take someone's temperature. Always make sure that the thermometer is clean, and that you read the instructions beforehand. If, after taking someone's temperature, the thermometer shows a raised temperature, take another reading about 20 minutes later to confirm it. A normal temperature can range from 36-36.8C (97.7-99.1°F). A temperature of 38C (100.4F), or above, is classed as a fever. If you're taking the temperature of a child, always stay with them

during the reading, and put the thermometer away immediately afterwards. You can buy thermometers from your local pharmacy, where a member of staff should be able to advise you about which thermometer will best suit your needs. There are lots of different types of thermometer available for home use, some of which are outlined below.

### **Mercury thermometers**

Mercury thermometers are now being phased out, because they are dangerous if they get broken. Mercury is poisonous if swallowed, or if it comes into contact with the skin. Only adults should use mercury thermometers because children are more likely to bite it and break the glass. You should shake a mercury thermometer before you use it. This is so that the mercury goes back into the bulb of the thermometer, which will allow you to take an accurate reading. To take a person's temperature, you can place a mercury thermometer either in their mouth, or under their armpit.

### **Digital thermometers**

As with mercury thermometers, digital thermometers can also be used to take someone's temperature from either their mouth or armpit. When you take a reading from the armpit, you should note that the temperature will be about 0.5C lower than the body's core temperature. This means that you should add about 0.5C to the reading to get a more accurate idea of the temperature. Armpit readings are not the most reliable or accurate way of taking the temperature. However, they may be a more suitable and safe way of taking the temperature of a small child. When taking an armpit reading, put the thermometer directly against the skin under the arm, and hold the arm gently against the chest. You may have to leave the thermometer there for up to five minutes to get an accurate reading. Temperature readings from the mouth are not suitable for very small children because they may bite the thermometer. However, they are an accurate and easy way to take an adult's temperature. Place the thermometer under the tongue for approximately 2-3 minutes. If the person has just eaten something very cold, or hot, wait 10 minutes before taking a reading.

### **Thermometer strips**

Thermometer strips are placed on the forehead. The strips give an approximate reading telling you if the person's temperature is normal, too hot, or too cold. As thermometer strips measure the temperature of the skin, rather than your body, they are not entirely accurate. However, they offer a quick and easy way to measure a person's temperature, and are particularly useful for taking a child's temperature. Using both hands, hold the strip on your child's forehead. Keep your fingers away from the heat-measuring panels, and hold it there for 2-3 minutes.

### **Ear thermometers**

Ear thermometers are expensive, but they are quick and easy to use. Read the instructions carefully to find out how long the reading will take, before gently placing the ear thermometer inside the ear. If the person has been outside in the cold, or lying on a pillow, wait for 10-15 minutes for their temperature to adjust before taking the reading. Many ear thermometers can be used on small babies, but check that yours is suitable before you use it. Ear thermometers are not always entirely accurate so they should not be used if a very precise reading is required.

If you are still concerned you may have swine flu, stay at home and check your symptoms using the online [National Pandemic Flu Service](https://www.pandemicflu.direct.gov.uk/) (https://www.pandemicflu.direct.gov.uk/).

Call your GP directly if:

- you have a serious existing illness that weakens your immune system, such as cancer,
- you are pregnant,
- you have a sick child under one,
- your condition **suddenly** gets much worse, or
- your condition is still getting worse after seven days (five for a child).

**Note:** the National Pandemic Flu Service is a new online service that will assess your symptoms and, if needed, provide an authorisation number that can be used to collect antiviral medication from a local collection point. For those who do not have internet access, the same service can be accessed by telephone on:

- Telephone: 0800 151 3100
- Minicom: 0800 151 3200

For more information on the National Pandemic Flu Service go to [Flu service: Q&A](#).

### High-risk groups

For most people, swine flu is a mild illness. Some people get better by staying in bed, drinking plenty of water and taking over-the-counter flu medication.

However, some groups of people are more at risk of serious illness if they catch swine flu, and will need to start taking antiviral medication as it is confirmed that they have it. It is already known that you are particularly at risk if you have:

- chronic (long-term) lung disease,
- chronic heart disease,
- chronic kidney disease,
- chronic liver disease,
- chronic neurological disease (neurological disorders include motor neurone disease, multiple sclerosis and Parkinson's disease),
- immunosuppression (whether caused by disease or treatment) or
- diabetes mellitus.

Also at risk are:

- patients who have had drug treatment for asthma within the past three years,
- pregnant women,
- people aged 65 and older, and
- young children under five.

It is vital that people in these higher-risk groups who catch swine flu get antivirals and start taking them as soon as possible.

### Spreading Swine Flu

The **incubation period** (the time from being exposed to the virus to showing symptoms of infection) is from one to four days: for most people, it will be 2-3 days. In terms of the **infectious period** (how long you are infectious to others), people are most infectious soon after they develop symptoms, and remain infectious to some extent until the symptoms disappear. In general, adults can continue to excrete viruses for up to five days, and children for up to seven days, but occasionally longer. Over this period, the amount of virus, and therefore the infection risk to others, will decline as symptoms improve, but does not disappear until the symptoms themselves also disappear.

Flu, including pandemic flu, is **spread from person to person** by close contact. Examples of how it may be spread include: Infected people can pass the virus to others through large droplets when coughing, sneezing, or even talking within a close distance (one metre or less). You can catch the virus by direct contact with an infected person: for example, if you shake or hold their hand, and then touch your own mouth, eyes or nose without first washing your hands. You can catch the virus by touching objects (eg door handles, light switches) that have previously been touched by an infected person, then touching your own mouth, eyes or nose without first washing your hands. The virus can survive longer on hard surfaces than on soft or absorbent surfaces.

## Controlling the Spread of Swine Flu

Everyone can play their part in helping to reduce the spread of pandemic flu. There are two key things to remember:

- a. Good hygiene practice – wash your hands regularly, particularly after coughing, sneezing or blowing your nose;
- b. If you have flu symptoms do not go come into school. If you become ill at school with any of the symptom identified above then report to the school office. If you become ill at home, with any of the above symptoms, then your parents should report it to the school. And you should stay at home until the symptoms abate.

### Key Messages

**Cover your cough** □ when you cough or sneeze, cover your nose and mouth with a tissue; throw away your tissue, into a proper bag or bin, as soon as you've used it.

**Wash your hands** Wash your hands frequently: On days when you are coughing, sneezing or blowing your nose, frequently wash your hands often with soap and water; or, if you can't use soap and water, use wipes or gels. Washing your hands is the single best way that you can help stop spreading germs that cause illness with coughs and sneezes.

1. Wet your hands with warm water, then add soap.
2. Rub in the soap, while you count to fifteen. Make sure you rub the soap into: the backs of your hands; the backs of your fingers; your finger-nails; your finger-tips; the skin between your fingers.
3. Rinse your hands under running water.
4. Dry your hands with a disposable paper towel or a hot-air blower.

[If you are wearing any rings or bracelets, remove them before washing your hands. If you have any cuts or scratches, cover them with a clean dressing]

### Outlook

For most people, the illness appears to be mild. Cases have been confirmed in all age groups, but children and younger people seem much more likely to be affected. To date, fewer cases have been confirmed in older adults.

For a minority of people, the virus has caused severe illness. In many of these cases, other factors have been identified that are likely to have contributed to the severity of the illness.

Worldwide, just over 0.4% of the laboratory-confirmed cases reported to the World Health Organization (WHO) have died. This is a similar rate to ordinary flu. The true number of swine flu cases is likely to be significantly higher than that reported to WHO and therefore the figure of 0.4% is likely to be an overestimate of the death rate.

Where complications do occur, they tend to be caused by the virus affecting the lungs. Infections such as pneumonia can develop.