



Health Protection Surveillance Centre  
Lárionad Faire um Chosaint Sláinte



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## Human Swine Influenza A (H1N1): Frequently asked questions

### What is swine influenza?

Swine influenza (swine flu) is a respiratory disease of pigs caused by type A influenza viruses. Outbreaks of swine influenza happen regularly in pigs.

### Can swine influenza infect humans?

People do not normally get swine influenza, but human infections can and do occur. Up to now, human cases of swine influenza have most commonly happened in people who are around pigs but it is possible for swine influenza viruses to spread from person to person, as is being seen now.

### Are there human swine influenza cases occurring now?

Yes. Cases of human infection with swine influenza A (H1N1) virus have recently been confirmed in Mexico and parts of the United States (California, Texas and Kansas).

### Why is this situation of concern?

The virus that has now been found in the human swine influenza cases in the U.S. and Mexico contains pig, bird and human genes in a combination that has not been observed before anywhere in the world. In addition, the virus appears to be spreading from person to person, and the resulting illnesses have been severe in a substantial number of cases in Mexico.

### Is this the start of an influenza pandemic?

An influenza pandemic is defined as a new or novel influenza virus that spreads easily between humans. When new influenza viruses are introduced into the environment, humans don't have any natural immunity to protect against them. Therefore, there is a risk that new influenza viruses could develop into a pandemic if the virus passes easily from person to person. It is too early to say whether the recent cases in Mexico and the U.S. will lead to a larger outbreak or could represent the appearance of a potential pandemic strain of influenza virus.

### What is the situation in Ireland and Europe?

There have been no cases of human swine influenza confirmed in Ireland or Europe so far.

### What are the symptoms of swine influenza in people?

The symptoms are like those of regular seasonal flu and include: fever of sudden onset, cough, sore throat, runny nose, headache and muscle aches. Some people have vomiting and diarrhoea. In severe cases, pneumonia may develop and death may occur.

### How do people get infected?

In the past, swine influenza has most commonly been transmitted through close contact with pigs. However, in the current situation, the virus appears to be spreading from person to person. It is thought to be spread mainly by coughing and sneezing by infected people. However, at this time it is not known how easily the virus spreads between people. This virus is not transmitted by eating pork or pork products.

### Is there a vaccine against human swine influenza?

There is a currently no vaccine to protect people from swine influenza.

### Is the seasonal influenza vaccine effective against swine influenza?

It is not yet known if the current seasonal influenza (flu) vaccines can provide any protection for humans against swine influenza. Investigations are under way to study this.

### Are there medicines to treat human swine influenza?

Yes, there are two anti-viral drugs, either of which is recommended for use in people with human swine influenza infection – oseltamivir and zanamivir. These medicines work best if started soon after getting sick (within 2 days of symptoms). They may also be used to prevent infection in people who have been in contact with an infected person. The virus that has recently been detected in the U.S. and Mexico seems to be sensitive to these two drugs.

### What can I do to protect myself from getting sick?

As with any infectious respiratory disease, the following precautionary measures are recommended:

- Cover your nose and mouth with disposable tissues when sneezing, coughing, wiping and blowing your nose.
- Dispose of used tissues in the nearest waste bin.
- Wash your hands often with soap and water, and especially after coughing and sneezing. Alcohol-based hand cleaners are also effective.
- Clean hard surfaces (e.g door handles) frequently using a normal cleaning product.
- Try to avoid close contact with sick people.
- If you are sick with flu, stay at home to avoid spreading infection to others. Avoid touching your eyes, nose or mouth.

**What should I do if I get sick?**

If you get sick with a flu-like illness as described above, and have recently visited an affected area or have been in contact with a known case of swine flu, contact your GP/family doctor by telephone. They will decide if you need testing or treatment.

**What is being done about the situation?**

Experts from around the world are working in close collaboration with the World Health Organization (WHO) to help determine what risk this situation poses to global public health. In Ireland, the Health Service Executive and the Department of Health and Children have been meeting regularly to review the cases of swine influenza A (H1N1) that have been identified in the United States and Mexico. Public Health officials from the HSE and the Health Protection Surveillance Centre are carefully monitoring reports of these cases and remain in close contact with WHO, the European Commission and the European Centre for Disease Control (ECDC).

**Is it safe to travel to the affected areas in Mexico or the United States?**

There has been no statement from WHO or the U.S. Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) concerning any travel restriction to the affected regions. People who intend to travel to these regions are advised to consult the WHO website <http://www.who.int/en/> for updates. All travellers are advised to follow the general hygienic measures listed above <What can I do to protect myself from getting sick?>

**What precautions are needed for travellers returning from affected areas?**

Travellers returning from affected areas should observe their personal health and if, within 7 days after return, they experience an illness like that described above <What are the symptoms of swine influenza in people?>, they should stay at home and immediately contact their GP/family doctor.

**Further information:**

<http://www.hse.ie/eng/>

<http://www.who.int/csr/disease/swineflu/en/index.html>

<http://www.cdc.gov/swineflu/>

<http://ecdc.europa.eu/en/>

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