

What is swine influenza?

Swine influenza, or “swine flu”, is a highly contagious acute respiratory disease of pigs, caused by one of several swine influenza A viruses. Morbidity tends to be high and mortality low (1-4%). The virus is spread among pigs by aerosols, direct and indirect contact, and asymptomatic carrier pigs. Outbreaks in pigs occur year round, with an increased incidence in the autumn and winter in temperate zones. Many countries routinely vaccinate swine populations against swine influenza.

Swine influenza viruses are most commonly of the H1N1 subtype, but other subtypes are also circulating in pigs (e.g., H1N2, H3N1, H3N2). Pigs can also be infected with avian influenza viruses and human seasonal influenza viruses as well as swine influenza viruses. The H3N2 swine virus was thought to have been originally introduced into pigs by humans. Sometimes pigs can be infected with more than one virus type at a time, which can allow the genes from these viruses to mix. This can result in an influenza virus containing genes from a number of sources, called a "reassortant" virus. Although swine influenza viruses are normally species specific and only infect pigs, they do sometimes cross the species barrier to cause disease in humans.

How do people become infected?

Humans usually contract swine influenza from infected pigs, however, some cases lack contact history with pigs or environments where pigs have been located. Human-to-human transmission has occurred in some instances but was limited to close contacts and closed groups of people.

How can I protect myself from getting swine influenza from infected people?

In the past, human infection with swine influenza was generally mild but is known to have caused severe illness such as pneumonia. For the current outbreaks in the United States and Mexico however, the clinical pictures have been different. None of the confirmed cases in the United States have had the severe form of the disease and the patients recovered from illness without requiring medical care. In Mexico, some patients reportedly had the severe form of the disease.

To protect yourself, practice general preventive measures for influenza:

- Avoid close contact with people who appear unwell and who have fever and cough.
- Wash your hands with soap and water frequently and thoroughly.
- Practice good health habits including adequate sleep, eating nutritious food, and keeping physically active.

If there is an ill person at home:

- Try to provide the ill person a separate section in the house. If this is not possible, keep the patient at least 1 meter in distance from others.
- Cover mouth and nose when caring for the ill person. Masks can be bought commercially or made using the readily available materials as long as they are disposed of or cleaned properly.
- Wash your hands with soap and water thoroughly after each contact with the ill person.
- Try to improve the air flow in the area where the ill person stays. Use doors and windows to take advantage of breezes.
- Keep the environment clean with readily available household cleaning agents.

If you are living in a country where swine influenza has caused disease in humans, follow additional advice from national and local health authorities.