

## **Swine Flu Questions and Answers**

### **What is Swine Flu**

Swine flu is a respiratory disease caused by a virus that has some elements of the virus that causes influenza in pigs. Scientists are still investigating its origins.

Infection with swine influenza virus has been detected occasionally in humans since the 1950s. Cases of swine influenza in humans have occurred after direct or close contact with infected pigs, but appear to be uncommon. The most recent published case was that of a pig breeder in Teruel, Spain last year. In the US there is an official swine influenza surveillance programme to monitor pig viruses.

### **How is the present outbreak different?**

A new swine flu has been confirmed in a number of countries and is spreading from human to human, leading to sporadic outbreaks. This present outbreak appears to be caused by a novel flu virus, one that has never been seen before.

The implication is that, because it is previously unknown, no one will have immunity to it and everyone could be at risk of catching it. This includes healthy adults as well as older people, young children and those with existing medical conditions.

However, if the virus shows some relationship to other previously known viruses, it is possible that some people may be able to resist it, because of previous exposure. This is called cross-immunity. So far, we have no scientific evidence for this, but it may exist.

### **What is a Pandemic flu?**

A Pandemic is a name for several outbreaks in several countries at the same time caused by the same germ. The World Health Organisation has declared that the Swine Flu outbreaks have the potential to become a Pandemic.

### **What are the symptoms of swine influenza?**

The symptoms of swine flu in people are similar to the symptoms of "regular" human winter flu infection. They include fever, fatigue, lack of appetite, coughing and sore throat. Some people with swine flu have also reported vomiting and diarrhoea.

### **Is this swine flu virus contagious?**

Yes. The virus is contagious (i.e., it can spread from person to person), although it is not known how easily. Like other flu and flu-like illnesses, it spreads through the air and through droplets that emerge when we cough and sneeze. This is why it is important to cover our mouths when we cough or sneeze, dispose of any soiled material quickly and wash our hands

### **How serious is it?**

We have very little information about its behaviour as yet, but what we have so far does not suggest that it is any more serious than the "regular" flu. As with any flu, a small proportion of people will have pneumonias or other complications, but the severity levels of this disease are still unclear. So far, most cases occurring outside Mexico have been mild.

### **Is treatment available?**

Most of the previously reported swine influenza cases recovered fully from the disease without requiring medical attention and without antiviral medicines.

At present, tests show that the virus is sensitive to some antiviral medicines (such as Tamiflu, which has had a lot of media coverage). However, in order to work, the medicines must be taken within 48 hours of the start of the symptoms, which is not always practicable.

## **Am I at risk?**

At present all cases appear to be associated with either travel to the affected areas or exposure to an individual who acquired the disease through travel. For all other persons, the risk is negligible. This position may change if the disease spreads more widely, but at present the risk remains low.

## **If someone who has been to affected areas, what should they do?**

First of all, there is no need to panic. Unless such a person is experiencing any flu-like symptoms, there is no need to do anything at all. Also such symptoms must arise within 7 days of being in the affected area.

However, if someone has recently travelled to an affected area and is experiencing flu-like symptoms, such persons should stay at home to limit contact with others and seek medical advice through the phone from the health service.

The Gibraltar Health Authority has set up a dedicated

### **SWINE FLU HELPLINE 20044411**

exclusively for the use of persons who have travelled to affected areas and have flu-like symptoms.

## **What does the Helpline do?**

The Helpline is manned by trained health professional staff who will be able to assess the caller's situation. They will then advise the caller whether it is safe to self-treat or whether a visit by a doctor or other professional is required. If this is the cases, the staff will also make the arrangements.

Please remember that the Helpline is only for advising travellers who have visited affected areas and have flu-like symptoms. The Helpline is not an information source on swine flu or for any other health service function. Use of the Helpline for other purposes will not be of any benefit and may delay obtaining the correct information.

## **I have to receive a relative arriving soon from an affected area, what should I do?**

First of all, check if they have flu-like symptoms. Unless they do, there is no need to do anything different. However, if they have flu-like symptoms, do not go to the airport or port to receive them. Advise them to go straight home and call the Swine Flu Helpline on 20044411.

## **Can't I get vaccinated?**

Unfortunately not, as there is no vaccine as yet against the swine flu, but major vaccine manufacturers are working on it. A vaccine could still be several months away. The regular human vaccine does not give immunity and it is too early to tell if there will be any cross immunity.

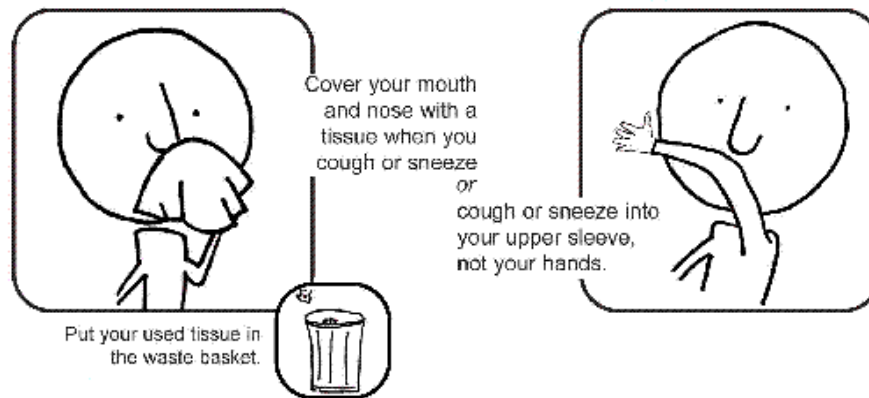
## **What measures can I take to protect against infection?**

Prevention is always better than cure. When there is no vaccine, it is even more important to observe preventive hygiene. Careful Respiratory Hygiene and Hand Hygiene, along with good common sense can substantially help to reduce transmission of all viruses, including the swine flu virus.

Remember :

- only Cough or Sneeze into a Tissue;
- if a tissue is not handy, never cough or sneeze into your Hands (although this habit has been taught to children for generations), but cough or sneeze into your Upper Sleeve or some such washable garment.

The drawing below explains this.



- after coughing or sneezing, dispose of the soiled tissue carefully and WASH YOUR HANDS
- Clean hard surfaces (e.g. door handles) frequently using a normal cleaning product.
- Make sure your children follow this advice.

### Should I wear face masks?

Wearing of facemasks does not confer any benefit to the general public. Available scientific evidence does not suggest this to be an effective preventative measure. On the other hand, there are several disadvantages that need to be considered:

- It encourages complacency. Wearing a face mask might discourage people from carrying out good hand hygiene, which is far more important.
- People might wear a facemask to conceal respiratory symptoms rather than stay at home.
- It is difficult to provide general advice on how to wear masks correctly and if not worn properly they may not provide any protection.
- Face masks must be changed frequently, which people do not often do. People who have to buy their masks are less likely to change them regularly.
- Facemasks must be disposed of properly if they are not to pose a risk to other people.
- Failing to wash hands after taking off a facemask might increase the risk of self-contamination.
- Reusing a face mask will render it ineffective and increase the risk of self-contamination.
- Contact with infectious persons in public areas would be random and unpredictable and masks might be worn for prolonged periods.
- The quality of the mask may be unpredictable.
- It has been found that most people simply pull off the mask when they feel a sneeze coming ... which completely defeats the object!

It is more rational for healthcare workers wear masks when they work directly with infected persons and body fluids. Their use is governed by rules and procedures for wearing, removing, disposing and washing, for which they receive training and are subject to monitoring.

### Is it safe to eat pork or pork products?

Yes. Swine flu viruses are not known to be transmitted by food. There is no risk of catching the illness from eating properly handled and cooked pork or pork products.

### What about Bird Flu (avian influenza)? Has it gone away?

Avian influenza is caused by influenza viruses adapted for infection in birds - just as swine influenza is caused by influenza viruses adapted for infection in pigs. Avian flu emerged as a human infection of serious significance three years ago and spreading to several countries, affecting thousands of persons and with around two hundred deaths. Since then, numbers of new cases have reduced.

It still remains a threat, but perhaps a more distant one at present.

### **Is Swine Flu going to be the next pandemic?**

It is too early to say whether the cases seen so far will lead to a larger outbreak or could represent the appearance of potential pandemic strain of influenza virus.

The World Health Organization usually leads on this matter. Gibraltar's public health team and the Civil Contingency Committee continue to keep vigilant on developments.

### **What is Gibraltar doing about this?**

The Civil Contingency Committee has been monitoring the events closely from the outset. The following are some of the key actions taken:

- **Invoking the Gibraltar Pandemic Plan** : Gibraltar has a systematic response plan involving all the key services, which have been put on appropriate levels of alert
- **Stockpiling of essential drugs** : The Government has procured a large stockpile of essential drugs, to a quantity larger than generally recommended.
- **Stockpiling of protective equipment** : At present the infection does not seem to warrant high levels of personal protection for staff, but stocks have been obtained just in case.
- **Helpline** : a Phone Helpline for the benefit of travellers returning from affected areas with flu-like symptoms.
- **Public information** : A Press Release and a Public Health Advisory have been issued, followed by this Public Health Educational leaflet. Through the Press, TV and other media, the Civil Contingency Committee intends to keep the public fully informed.

### **So what is the final word?**

A new form of flu has emerged in the Americas and has infected people in several countries. Most cases have been mild, but Mexico has had more serious cases and several deaths. Its spread appears to be facilitated by international travel. There is much international excitement and worry that it might turn into a pandemic, like the Spanish flu, nearly a century ago, but it is too soon to tell just yet, if it will go that far at all.

In the meantime, as a responsible society, we have taken all the possible precautions to protect ourselves against the worst case and for the present, it is a matter of getting on with our lives while keeping a watchful eye on developments far away that might just impact upon us.

**Prepared by Dr Vijay Kumar for GHA staff**