

Swine Flu FAQ



Foreign tourists wearing protective masks stand in the main Zocalo plaza in downtown Mexico City, Monday. (AP Photo/Enric Marti)

What is swine influenza?

It is a respiratory disease of pigs caused by type A strains of the influenza virus. It regularly causes high flu outbreaks in pigs but with low death rates. There are four main sub-types of the virus, but the most recent isolated influenza viruses from pigs have been H1N1 viruses.

How does it spread?

Swine flu viruses do not typically infect humans though they do occur through close proximity or contact with infected pigs or contaminated areas. Cases of human-to-human spread have been documented.

What are the symptoms?

The symptoms are similar to those of regular flu:

- Fever
- Lethargy
- Runny nose
- Cough
- Sore throat

- Lack of appetite
- Vomiting and diarrhoea in some cases.

How common is swine flu infection in humans?

In the past reports of about one human swine flu virus infection had been received every one to two years in the United States. From December 2005 till February 2009, 12 cases have been reported.

Has this strain of flu been seen before?

No. Flu mutates constantly, so it is common for new strains to emerge. Pigs can also be infected with both human and avian influenza, and the current circulating swine flu strain appears to contain genetic elements from all three.

Can swine flu be treated with antiviral drugs and flu vaccine?

The swine flu is resistant to two common drugs – Amantadine and Rimantadine. The H1N1 swine flu viruses are very different from human H1N1 viruses. Therefore, vaccines for human seasonal flu would not provide protection. However, a “seed vaccine” has been specifically tailored to this swine flu and will be manufactured if officials deem it necessary.

Can people catch swine flu by eating pork?

No. Swine influenza viruses are not transmitted by food. Eating properly handled and cooked pork and pork products is safe. Cooking pork to an internal temperature of 70°C and above kills the swine flu virus.

How long is someone with swine flu considered contagious?

People with swine influenza virus infection should be considered potentially contagious as long as they are symptomatic; possibly for up to seven days following the onset of the illness. Children, especially younger children, might potentially be contagious for longer periods.

What can I do to protect myself from the swine flu?

There is no vaccine available right now to protect against the swine flu.

However, you can help prevent the spread of germs that cause respiratory illnesses like influenza by:

- Covering your nose and mouth with a disposable tissue or handkerchief when you cough or sneeze. Throw the tissue in the waste basket after you use it.

- Wash your hands often with soap and water, especially after you cough or sneeze. Alcohol-based hand cleaners are also helpful
- Try to avoid close contact with sick people. - If you get sick with influenza, stay at home and limit contact with others to keep from infecting them.
- Avoid touching your eyes, nose or mouth.
- Consult your nearest healthcare facility if you think you have any of the symptoms.

Which countries have had cases of the swine flu?

The World Health Organisation (WHO) has confirmed human cases of swine flu in Mexico, the United States, Canada and Spain. Only Mexico has reported deaths from the new strain.

Are there any travel restrictions or advisories for Malaysians?

The Health Ministry on April 27 advised Malaysians against travelling to certain places in the United States, Mexico and Canada which have been affected by the swine flu.

What precautions are in place in Malaysia?

- The Health Ministry's operations room in Putrajaya has started a 24-hour monitoring of the situation. The public can call 03-8881 0200/300 for enquiries.
- Those returning from Latin American countries and found to have flu-like symptoms will be quarantined.
- Health Ministry officials are conducting health screenings on passengers arriving from the United States.
- Thermal scanners will be placed at international airports to speed up the screening process for swine flu.
- Public and private medical practitioners have been instructed to report to the district health office any patient with influenza-like illnesses or severe pneumonia symptoms and who had travelled to the affected countries after April 17.
- Owners of the 797 pig farms nationwide have been ordered to immediately contact the nearest Veterinary Services Department office or the Animal Disease Control Centre if their workers or animals show symptoms linked to the swine flu.

Where can I get more information?

For more information, go to the Health Ministry (www.moh.gov.my) or call the Ministry's hotline at (03) 8881-0200/300.

Useful Links:

World Health Organization: www.who.int

Centers for Disease Control and Prevention: www.cdc.gov

Homeland Security Department: www.dhs.gov

WHO swine flu page: <http://www.who.int/csr/disease/swineflu/en/index.html>