

WHO warns swine flu 'unstoppable'



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WHO calls for vigilance over swine flu

The UN's top health official has opened a forum in Mexico on combating swine flu by saying that the spread of the virus worldwide is now unstoppable.

World Health Organization head Margaret Chan added that the holding of the meeting in Cancun showed confidence in Mexico, which has been hard hit.

The WHO says most H1N1 cases are mild, with many people recovering unaided.

As the summit opened, the UK alone was projecting more than 100,000 new cases of H1N1 a day by the end of the summer.

As the peak of the flu season approaches in South America, some areas have declared a public health emergency.

El Salvador reported its first death from swine flu, a day after Paraguay reported its first fatality.

'Mild symptoms'

"As we see today, with well over 100 countries reporting cases, once a fully fit pandemic virus emerges, its further international spread is unstoppable," Dr Chan said in her opening remarks.



A hospital in Athens, Greece, has been quarantined for swine flu

She stressed that the overwhelming majority of patients experienced mild symptoms and made a full recovery within a week, often in the absence of any form of medical treatment.

The exceptions, she said, were pregnant women and people with underlying health problems, who were at higher risk from complications from the virus and should be monitored if they fell ill.

"For a pandemic of moderate severity, this is one of our greatest challenges: helping people to understand when they do not need to worry, and when they do need to seek urgent care," Dr Chan said.

Turning to the summit venue, the WHO chief added: "Mexico is a safe, as well as a beautiful and warmly gracious, place to visit."

Leaders and experts from 50 countries are in Cancun for the two-day meeting to discuss strategies for combating the virus.

It has been more than two months since the initial alert over swine flu.

Since then, the H1N1 virus has entered more than 100 countries, infected more than 70,000 people and killed more than 300 worldwide.

Authorities across South America are becoming increasingly concerned as the peak flu season approaches, the BBC's Andy Gallacher reports from Cancun.

Schools across Argentina have sent students home and pregnant women have been told they can take two weeks off work to avoid contracting the virus.

It is hoped the Cancun meeting will address many of the issues that might help slow the spread of swine flu but, our correspondent adds, many people are concerned that an effective vaccine has still not been developed.