

H1N1 Influenza A (Swine Flu) Infection

Current Situation:

Influenza A (H1N1) has already been confirmed in many parts of the world. As of 06:00 GMT, 21 May 2009, 41 countries have officially reported 11, 034 cases of influenza A (H1N1) infection, including 85 deaths according to the World Health Organisation (WHO). As of 22 May 2009 there have been 10 (mostly imported) confirmed cases in Australia with no deaths (Department of Health and Ageing Australian government).

There have been 10 deaths as a result of the 7142 confirmed cases outside of Mexico to date and most were in persons with significant medical problems placing them at much greater risk of succumbing to complications of influenza. According to the WHO “with the exception of the outbreak in Mexico, which is still not fully understood, this H1N1 virus tends to cause very mild illness in otherwise healthy people.” Details of influenza symptoms are to be found at www.health.qld.gov.au/swineflu/html/symptoms.asp

The past death rates from influenza are difficult to ascertain with certainty but the above figures are much less than the quite high mortality rates seen with persons infected as a result of animal contact with bird flu (H5N1). The mortality from the infamous Spanish flu epidemic in 1918 has been estimated to range from 2 to 20%.

There are however no grounds for complacency as the H1N1 Influenza (swine flu) strain causing the current outbreak is a new virus that has not been seen previously in either humans or animals. Although firm conclusions cannot be reached at present, scientists anticipate that pre-existing immunity to the virus will be low or non-existent, or largely confined to older people. This H1N1 virus appears to be more contagious than seasonal influenza. The infection rate for seasonal influenza after significant contact with someone with seasonal influenza ranges from 5% to 15% according to WHO data. Current estimates of the infection rate of this H1N1 after similar contact range from 22% to 33%.

The WHO is coordinating the global response to this infection and is not recommending travel restrictions related to the outbreak of the H1N1 Influenza A (swine flu) virus. According to the WHO the global response now focuses on minimizing the impact of the virus through the rapid identification of cases, and providing patients with appropriate medical care, rather than on stopping its spread internationally. To that end anti-viral medication is available in affected countries to treat people with this infection. The WHO is funding the distribution of anti-viral drugs and equipment to developing countries.

Prevention:

There are steps that persons can take to reduce the risk of both seasonal and H1N1 Influenza (swine flu) infection. The best ways to protect yourself and others is to:

- Wash your hands frequently with soap and water or use an alcohol based hand gel;
- Wash your hands prior to touching your eyes, nose and mouth;
- When coughing or sneezing, cover your mouth and nose with disposable tissues which should be disposed of immediately;
- Don't share items such as cigarettes, glasses or cups, lipstick, toys or anything which could be contaminated with respiratory secretions;

- Maintain at least one metre distance from people who have flu-like symptoms such as coughing or sneezing;
- Consult a doctor if you have a cough and fever. Follow their instructions, including taking medicine as prescribed;
- The seasonal influenza vaccine is unlikely to offer useful protection against H1N1 Influenza (swine flu) however it is strongly recommended that people continue to be vaccinated against seasonal influenza;
- Mask use in Australia is not recommended except in health care settings involving persons likely to be infected with H1N1 Influenza (swine flu).

Further advice is available at:

www.who.int/csr/disease/swineflu/en/index.html

<http://www.healthemergency.gov.au/internet/healthemergency/publishing.nsf/Content/updates>

www.health.qld.gov.au/swineflu

www.cdc.gov/h1n1flu

<http://www.uq.edu.au/hupp/index.html?page=104001&pid=25015>

Recommendations for persons travelling internationally:

- Consult smartraveller.gov.au travel advice specific to your destination before travel and take advice if you are unsure about what to do and consider delaying your trip if the risk to you is considered significant;
- Be vaccinated against seasonal influenza and this should be administered at least two weeks before departure overseas;
- Do not travel internationally if you are unwell;
- Observe the general preventive measures above while travelling;
- It is impractical to wear face masks for long periods but these could be worn in crowded situations where you are in close proximity with persons with a significant probability of being infected e.g. in a hospital or medical practice in a country with a large number of cases of H1N1 Influenza A but not in a park when you are away from crowds and people coughing and sneezing. Masks should be the equivalent of a good quality Australian dust mask (P2) or the N95 mask if possible but a surgical mask can be worn if these are unavailable. It is important not to contaminate your hands by touching your mask while wearing it and to wash your hands thoroughly after removing your mask;
- There is no need for you to take anti-viral medication with you when you travel. If you develop a flu-like illness seek medical advice promptly. Most countries have national stockpiles or have antiviral medication for treatment of suspected cases courtesy of the WHO. If you are unwell and thought to be suffering from H1N1 Influenza A (swine) flu you will be treated with anti-viral medication;
- If attending a medical practice or hospital Emergency Department because of flu symptoms (fever, cough and marked fatigue), telephone beforehand so that arrangements can be made to for you to be examined away from other people.

UQ is monitoring the situation closely and is in regular communication with Queensland Health which in turn is following the directions of the Australian Government and the World Health Organisation. Any university specific enquiries regarding H1N1 Influenza A (swine flu) can be made via email from healthservice@uq.edu.au or ohsunit@uq.edu.au.