Updated 4/29/09

Swine Flu
Frequently Asked Questions

What is swine flu?

Like humans, pigs get the flu. They develop a sudden fever, a barking cough, sneezing, lethargy, and typically lose their appetite.

Pigs usually don't die from swine flu; their flu viruses cause high levels of illness but low death rates.

Swine influenza viruses circulate among pigs throughout the year, but most outbreaks occur during the late fall and winter, just like with outbreaks in humans.

Most swine flu viruses belong to the Influenza A H1N1 and H3N2 subtypes.

Can humans catch swine flu?

Normally, swine flu bugs don't infect people. When they do, it's in people who have direct contact with pigs. Historically, there's such a case every year or two in the U.S.

There have now been several clusters of swine flu cases identified in the U.S.

Even before these clusters, there had been a surge in cases in recent years. Since December 2005, there have been 12 human swine flu infections - about four a year.

It's possible this uptick was due to improved reporting systems, but the U.S. Centers for Disease Control (CDC) says "genetic changes in swine flu viruses and other factors might also be a factor."

Can humans pass swine flu?

Usually no. But in this case, human-to-human transfer has been confirmed.

This human-to-human transfer is the main criteria for the CDC upgrading the pandemic alert to a stage 4 out of 6.

Is this a new kind of swine flu?

Yes. The CDC reports that the virus in these latest cases is a never-before-seen mixture of viruses typical among pigs, birds, and humans. The influenza A H1N1 virus contains DNA typical to avian, swine, and human viruses, including elements from European and Asian swine viruses.

Although it's called swine flu, this new strain is not infecting pigs and has never been seen in pigs.

Why would a new strain be worrisome?

If an influenza virus changes and becomes a new strain against which people have little or no immunity, and this new strain is easily spread from person to person, many people around the world could become ill.

Epidemiologists have been saying it's just a matter of time before a new strain of the flu emerges that has the potential to infect millions. Flu pandemics have historically occurred about three times per century and the world hasn't seen one in 40 years.

Is there a vaccine?

There is a vaccine available that can be given to pigs to prevent swine influenza, but there is no vaccine to protect humans from swine flu.

I got the flu shot this year. Am I protected?

No. H1N1 swine flu viruses are very different from human H1N1 viruses and, therefore, vaccines for human flu would not provide protection from H1N1 swine flu viruses.

Can people catch swine flu from eating pork?

No. Swine influenza viruses are not transmitted by food; you cannot get swine influenza from eating pork or pork products.

What are the symptoms of swine flu in humans?

Based on the seven cases seen in the U.S., symptoms of swine flu are similar to those of the regular flu: sudden onset of fever, coughing, aches and pains, and extreme fatigue. Swine flu appears to cause diarrhea and vomiting, symptoms that are not usually found in regular flu in adults.

Can we treat swine flu in humans?

Yes. Most swine influenza viruses have been susceptible to antiviral medications. The virus from the most recent swine flu cases appeared to be resistant to amantadine and rimantadine, but was susceptible to zanamivir and oseltamivir (Tamiflu).

Have there been swine flu outbreaks before?

Yes. Most famously, there was an outbreak in 1976 at Fort Dix, N.J., among military recruits that grabbed big headlines at the time.

Worried they had the beginning of a pandemic on their hands, U.S. officials ordered the manufacture of swine flu vaccine and the country launched a mass immunization program that saw about 40 million people vaccinated.

But the outbreak didn't turn into a pandemic and went away as mysteriously as it appeared.

--Angela Mulholland, CTV.ca News
Sources: The Canadian Press, Public Health Agency of Canada and the U.S. Centers for Disease Control