

Swine Flu: What You Need To Know

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Healthline

As the number of confirmed cases of swine flu rose above 20, the US declared a public health emergency on Sunday. This comes in the wake of 80 deaths declared “likely linked” to the deadly new strain in Mexico.

Here’s what you need to know about swine flu:

Why is Swine Flu in The News?

The number of fatalities in Mexico coupled with reported cases in the US, Canada and New Zealand brought the outbreak to the attention of health officials and the media. Also of concern is the fact that the strain in Mexico is attacking healthy young people, a trait usually associated with pandemic flu bugs.

What is Swine Flu?

Swine flu is just what it sounds like...a strain of flu that effects pigs and usually remains just that. Sometimes a strain of swine flu will mutate and is contracted by humans. This strain appears to be a mixture of swine, avian and human viruses and mutated viruses concern health officials due to their resistance to existing vaccines. A high fever, consistent cough, sore throat and possibly vomiting and diarrhea are the most common symptoms of swine flu, but those symptoms can be caused by countless other conditions as well. If you or someone you’ve been in close contact with has recently returned from Mexico and your flu-like symptoms persist, contact your doctor. Only a lab test can identify swine flu.

No vaccine for swine flu exists currently, but the Center for Disease Control has begun the steps needed to create one, in case that becomes necessary. This season’s flu shot does not offer protection to this virus.

What is the Government Doing?

Since this is a quickly developing outbreak and there are still many unknowns, the White House has likened their efforts to preparing for a hurricane. "Really that's what we're doing right now. We're preparing in an environment where we really don't know ultimately what the size or seriousness of this outbreak is going to be," Homeland Security Secretary Janet Napolitano told reporters. The act of declaring this a public health emergency clears the way for shipping roughly 12 million doses of flu-fighting medications from a federal stockpile to states that may need them. The Center for Disease Control says that isn’t currently needed, as the cases in the US are less severe than those in Mexico.

While the government is taking the right precautions, it’s important to point out that this is not a global pandemic — at least not yet. The true number of cases, why the Mexican cases are more severe and how easily the virus spreads are still unanswered.

Can Swine Flu be Treated?

Yes. This specific strain can be treated with Tamiflu and Relenza.

How to Protect Yourself

The most common question on everyone’s mind is “how can I protect myself?” The good news is that common health tips that help stop the spread of seasonal flu can be effective with preventing swine flu as well. The following are recommended steps from the CDC:

- Wash your hands often with soap and water, especially after you cough or sneeze. Alcohol-based hand cleaners are also effective.
- Avoid touching your eyes, nose or mouth. Germs spread this way.
- Try to avoid close contact with sick people.
- If you get sick with influenza, CDC recommends that you stay home from work or school and limit contact with others to keep from infecting them. What is the best way to keep from spreading the virus through coughing or sneezing?

At this point, the best advice is to take the right precautions and to not panic. The CDC will be issuing statements and advice as more information is known. Follow the developments on Healthline.com and other major news outlets.