

# What you need to know about Influenza A (swine flu)

No doubt you've heard about the swine flu (recently renamed *Influenza A*) outbreak that is currently spreading around the world. There is a lot of information and potential for misinformation across the different forms of media. Here are some facts about Influenza A to give you some peace of mind and help you develop a plan for you and your family.

**What is Influenza A?** The swine influenza (H1N1) is a respiratory disease caused by type A influenza that affects pigs but does not normally infect humans. However, sporadic human infections with Influenza A have occurred, most commonly with persons in direct exposure to pigs. With this recent outbreak, it appears human-to-human spread is occurring. Just like other types of influenzas the virus can spread through liquid droplets that get airborne from coughing or sneezing. You can also contract it by touching something with the live virus on it and then touching your mouth, eyes, or nose. With most influenza strains, the virus can live for up to 8 hours on most surfaces.

**What does a Level 5 alert from the World Health Organization really mean?** On April 29th the W.H.O. raised their alert from a 4 to a 5 indicating that the virus is known to have mutated from animal to human and it believes a global outbreak of the disease or pandemic is imminent. W.H.O. says the phase 5 alert means there is sustained human-to-human spread in at least two countries. It also signals that efforts to produce a vaccine will be ramped up.

**What is a pandemic?** A pandemic flu is not your average flu – it's an outbreak of a highly infectious illness on a large scale that is spread person to person. Historically there have been several outbreaks of pandemic flu during each century. During the last century, three flu pandemics occurred, the largest one in 1918.

In the current case of Influenza A, more investigation and information is needed to determine how easily the virus spreads and whether it will become a full-blown pandemic.

**What are the symptoms?** Influenza A symptoms are similar to those of regular human seasonal influenza. They include:

- Fever
- Lethargy
- Lack of appetite
- Coughing
- Headaches
- In some cases, people have reported a runny nose, sore throat, nausea, vomiting, and diarrhea.

**Does your seasonal flu vaccination protect you?** This year's annual influenza immunization, or flu shot, protects against the human strain of H1N1 influenza. The human swine influenza H1N1 strain is different than the human strain. It is unlikely that the seasonal flu shot will provide protection against human swine influenza.

**What should I do if I have flu symptoms?** Stay home and avoid public places. Before going to see a doctor or medical clinic, call first and let them know what your symptoms are and ask what they recommend you do.



**How is Influenza A diagnosed?** In order to diagnose it, a respiratory specimen would generally need to be collected within the first 4 or 5 days of illness (when an infected person is most likely to be shedding the virus). However, some persons, especially children, may shed the virus for 10 days or longer.

**How can I protect myself?** The Public Health Agency advises Canadians to:

- Wash hands thoroughly with soap and warm water, or use hand sanitizer
- Cough and sneeze in your arm or sleeve
- Get your annual flu shot
- Keep doing what you normally do, but stay home if sick
- Check [www.fightflu.ca](http://www.fightflu.ca) for more information
- Check [www.voyage.gc.ca](http://www.voyage.gc.ca) for travel notices and advisories
- Talk to a health professional if you experience severe flu-like symptoms

**Should I wear a mask for protection?** The Public Health Agency of Canada does not recommend that members of the general public wear surgical masks to protect against contracting Influenza A. Evidence shows that this is not effective in preventing transmission of influenza in the general public. People often use masks incorrectly, or contaminate them when putting them on and taking them off, which could actually increase the risk of infection. Instead, we should continue to take normal precautions including washing hands frequently, covering coughs and sneezes, and staying home when ill.

**Can I get it from eating pork?** No. It's safe to eat pork if it has been properly handled and cooked to an internal temperature of 160°F which kills off most bacteria and viruses, including the virus that causes Influenza A.

**Are antiviral drugs available and do they work in this case?** Antivirals are drugs used for the prevention and early treatment of influenza. If taken shortly after getting sick (within 48 hours), they can reduce influenza symptoms, shorten the length of illness and potentially reduce the serious complications of influenza.

Antivirals work by reducing the ability of the virus to reproduce but do not provide immunity against the virus. The human swine influenza H1N1 can be treated with two different antivirals: *oseltamavir* (Tamiflu) and *zanamivir* (Relenza).

Antiviral medications are prescription drugs. Initially, they may be obtained from a pharmacy with a regular prescription. There is a national stockpile of antiviral medication, and some provinces and territories also have their own stockpiles.

The good news is that it appears most people who have contracted Influenza A are able to recover on their own, just like with most seasonal influenzas.

**Should I cancel an upcoming trip to Mexico or the Southern US?** The Public Health Agency of Canada recently issued travel warnings so be sure to check out the latest information (<http://www.phac-aspc.gc.ca/tmp-pmv/pub-eng.php>). If travelling to affected areas, do the same things you would normally do to protect yourself and others during normal flu season. Wash your hands, cover coughs and sneezes, stay in if you are sick and get an annual influenza immunization (flu shot).

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