

## Frequently Asked Questions

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Human swine influenza has been reported in Canada, Mexico and the United States. You will find herewith the Frequently Asked Questions from the Public Health Agency of Canada (PHAC).

[www.phac-aspc.gc.ca/alert-alerte/swine-porcine/faq\\_rg\\_swine-eng.php](http://www.phac-aspc.gc.ca/alert-alerte/swine-porcine/faq_rg_swine-eng.php)

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**Q1. I have heard that people are becoming sick with swine influenza. What is it?**

Human swine influenza has been reported in Canada, Mexico and the United States.

Swine influenza (sometimes called swine flu) is a strain of the influenza virus that usually affects pigs, but which may also make people sick.

Human swine influenza is a respiratory illness that causes symptoms similar to those of the regular human seasonal flu. The symptoms include fever, fatigue, lack of appetite, coughing and sore throat. Some people with human swine influenza have also reported vomiting and diarrhea.

**Q2. How can an influenza virus spread from pigs to people?**

Different strains of influenza are commonly circulating in our environment, including strains that can cause illness in humans, birds and pigs.

Sometimes, humans and animals can pass strains of flu back and forth to one another through direct close contact - such as in pig production barns and livestock exhibits at fairs. For people in close contact with pigs, the recommendations to avoid infection are the same as for regular seasonal influenza – frequent handwashing, getting an annual flu shot, covering coughs and sneezes, and staying home when ill.

When a swine influenza virus does affect a human, there is also a risk that the animal influenza can mutate and then spread directly between humans.

**Q3. Is human swine influenza contagious? How does it spread between people?**

Yes, this virus is contagious. Since some of the people who have become ill in the United States and Mexico have not been in direct contact with pigs, we know that the virus has spread from person to person.

More investigation is needed on how easily the virus spreads between people, but it is believed that it is spread the same way as regular seasonal influenza.

Influenza and other respiratory infections are transmitted from person to person when germs enter the nose and/or throat. Coughs and sneezes release germs into the air where they can be breathed in by others. Germs can also rest on hard surfaces like counters and doorknobs, where they can be picked up on hands and transmitted to the respiratory system when someone touches their mouth and/or nose.

**Q4. What can I do to protect myself from infection?**

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

**Q5. Why are people concerned about this particular strain?**

The strain of human swine influenza (H1N1) reported in Canada, Mexico and the United States is a new, or novel, influenza virus.

Since this is a new strain, people will likely have no natural immunity to protect against the virus. International experts are concerned that this strain could spread quickly. Investigation is underway to learn more about the way the virus spreads. Governments around the world and the World Health Organization are engaged to investigate and address this situation.

**Q6. Are all cases of human swine influenza severe?**

No. The cases of human swine influenza reported in Canada and in the United States were milder than those reported in Mexico. All of the cases reported to date in Canada and the U.S. have recovered. The cases reported in Mexico have been more severe, involving mostly healthy young people who rapidly progressed from mild illness to severe respiratory distress, within an average of five days.

**Q7. Now that human swine influenza cases have been detected in Canada, what additional steps will the Government of Canada take to contain the virus?**

Our primary goal is to slow the spread of the disease.

A number of steps are involved in doing this:

- Surveillance is being increased and frontline health care workers are actively looking for and reporting positive cases.
- Health care workers have been provided with detailed advice on how to manage suspect and/or confirmed cases.
- If they are needed, antiviral medications from Canada's stockpile will be used both to treat active illness and to prevent onset of illness in people close to the affected patient – this is called "prophylaxis".
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**Q8. Does the Government of Canada recommend the closing of schools, and other gathering places to limit the spread of the virus?**

In Canada, decisions about school closures are made by local authorities and under certain circumstances, this may be advisable. PHAC recommends that people who are sick stay at home to reduce the risk of spreading infection. If this influenza virus spreads, people may want to avoid crowds to decrease the chance of exposure.

**Q9. Should Canadians take any extra measures like wearing surgical masks to avoid catching human swine influenza?**

Canadians should continue to take normal precautions to protect themselves as they would from a regular flu. While we are investigating to learn more about how this virus spreads, our best advice is for Canadians to wash their hands frequently, cover coughs and sneezes, and stay home when ill.

The Public Health Agency of Canada does not recommend that members of the general public wear surgical masks to protect against contracting human swine influenza. 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.

**Q10. I have heard that WHO has declared a public health emergency. What does this mean for Canada?**

The Government of Canada has already engaged measures to step up vigilance against this disease, including increased surveillance and sharing of information – which have been recommended by WHO through this declaration.

**Q11. What measures will be taken internationally to slow the spread of disease?**

- If necessary, travel advisories will be issued recommending that people avoid non-essential travel to affected areas.
- Internationally, the level of surveillance will increase.
- Quarantine officers are stationed in airports, at the Halifax, Montreal and Vancouver Port, and at borders and will detain individuals with symptoms of illness so that they can be assessed.

**Q12. How are antiviral medications made available if needed?**

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. Every province and territory has access to the national stockpile and antivirals have been distributed on a per-capita basis.

**Q13. Will the antivirals work against this strain of human swine influenza?**

Laboratory tests from the first cases indicate that this strain of human swine influenza is susceptible to the antivirals we have in the stockpiles.

**Q14. If this develops into a pandemic, how long will it take for Canada to develop a vaccine to protect against it?**

Canada has a plan for a vaccine to be produced domestically if a pandemic occurs. Once the virus is identified, it takes about six months for an effective vaccine to be developed and tested. Enough pandemic vaccine will be produced to cover all Canadians.

**Q.15. What is the difference between an antiviral and a vaccine?**

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 zanamivri (Relenza).

A vaccine is any preparation intended to produce immunity to a disease by stimulating the production of antibodies. Vaccines are the primary means to prevent illness and death from influenza. They stimulate the production of antibodies against the flu virus components included in the vaccine, providing immunity against the virus.

In order to provide the best protection, a vaccine must be tailored to fight off specific strains of influenza.

**Q16. I got my flu shot this year. Will it protect me against human swine influenza?**

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. The flu shot will protect against the seasonal flu, which is still circulating in Mexico.

**Q17. What protection will the Government of Canada offer to healthcare workers to protect against human swine influenza?**

Healthcare workers will need to practice frequent hand washing. When in close contact with affected patients, healthcare workers will use added safeguards such as wearing masks and eye protection.

**Q18. Should people be avoiding exposure to pigs?**

In this case, we know that this human swine influenza (H1N1) is spreading between humans – not directly from pigs to people. As a result, there is little increased risk from proximity to pigs.

However, because humans can also spread the disease to pigs, individuals with influenza symptoms should avoid close contact with pigs to reduce the possibility of further disease transmission in the animal population.

Government officials are conducting investigations to find out more about how this particular strain of human swine influenza spreads.

**Q19. Is this the next influenza pandemic?**

It is too soon to know. Pandemic influenza is defined as a new influenza virus that spreads easily between humans and affects a wide geographic area. In this case, more investigation and information is needed to determine how easily the virus spreads. This investigation is ongoing.

**Q20. Are all pandemics severe?**

No. An influenza pandemic may be mild or severe. An influenza pandemic means the virus is spread easily between humans, and affects a wide geographic area. A pandemic influenza does not necessarily cause more severe illness.

**Q21. I have plans to travel to Mexico (or the Southern United States). Should I cancel my trip?**

As of April 27 2009, **travellers from Canada are recommended to postpone elective or non-essential travel to Mexico until further notice.**

**Q22. If I have travelled to Mexico and/or California or Texas and I'm feeling sick, what should I do?**

If you have travelled to Mexico, California or Texas and you become sick with flu-like symptoms - especially respiratory symptoms such as, fever and cough or difficulty breathing - see your doctor and tell him or her that you have recently travelled to those areas.

**Q23. What should I do if I get sick while I am travelling?**

If you develop symptoms while you are travelling, seek care from local health care professionals.

**Q24. What should I do if I feel sick when I am supposed to fly or travel by train or bus?**

If you have symptoms of illness, see a doctor before boarding an airplane or other forms of public transportation. If you become sick while at the airport, consult airport officials before boarding the airplane.

**Q25. Are all the influenza-like-illnesses reported in Mexico linked to the human swine influenza?**

No. Mexico's flu season is peaking later than usual this year. Seasonal Influenza A and B are still being reported in Mexico.

**Q26. What is being done to make sure that people who are travelling do not spread the virus?**

Federal Quarantine officers are stationed in airports, at the Halifax, Montreal and Vancouver Ports, and at borders and will detain individuals with symptoms of illness when departing or arriving in Canada so that they can be assessed.

However, people may not have symptoms until later. If this happens, they should contact their health care professional to discuss their symptoms and travel history.

**Q27. Can I catch swine influenza from eating pork?**

No. Proper cooking of pork products would kill any viruses. Make sure pork is cooked through, not pink in the middle. Use a food thermometer to confirm pork has been heated through to 71 degrees Celsius (160 degrees Fahrenheit).