

Ministry of Health Information Sheet on Influenza A (H1N1)

The new influenza A (H1N1), commonly known as “swine flu”, is a new virus. It was first detected in people in Mexico and the United States in April 2009, and it may have been circulating in Mexico for some weeks before that. By early June 2009, over 70 countries had reported people who had at some time been sick with the new virus. The new influenza A (H1N1) can spread from person-to-person, probably in much the same way that regular seasonal influenza viruses spread. It is a different strain of influenza from the seasonal flu viruses which circulate around New Zealand in winter. The new influenza A (H1N1) has developed from the re-assortment of a number of other influenza viruses.

Why is this new virus sometimes called ‘swine flu’?

There are many forms of flu which affect animals and humans. These can mutate or exchange genes, to create a new virus. The new influenza A (H1N1) virus was originally referred to as ‘swine flu’ because some of the genetic structure of the virus is of a type that normally infects pigs. However, this new virus is circulating among people rather than pigs.

Is the new influenza A (H1N1) virus contagious?

Yes. Health experts believe this new virus spreads the same way as seasonal flu. However, because it is a new virus, there is little or no immunity in the population so it is expected to spread even more swiftly, and widely, than common seasonal influenza. There is spread among communities overseas, but at this stage, the only cases in New Zealand have been among travellers who have picked up the virus overseas or their close contacts.

How could I catch the new influenza A (H1N1)?

When infected people cough or sneeze, infected droplets get on their hands, drop onto surfaces, or are dispersed into the air. Another person nearby can breathe in the droplets, or touch infected hands or surfaces, and be exposed. To prevent spread, people should wash and dry their hands regularly, and sick people should cover their mouth and nose with a tissue when coughing, and stay home until they are well.

What are the symptoms?

The symptoms of the new influenza A (H1N1) virus in people are similar to the symptoms of seasonal flu and can include fever, cough, sore throat, runny or stuffy nose, body aches, headache, chills and fatigue. Some people who have been infected with this virus have also reported diarrhoea and vomiting. Also, like seasonal flu, in rare instances overseas severe illness and death has occurred.

The World Health Organisation (WHO) says you will not be able to tell the difference between seasonal flu and non-seasonal influenza A (H1N1) without medical help.

How long is someone infectious?

The new influenza A (H1N1) virus seems to behave in the same way as seasonal flu - people may be contagious from one day before they develop symptoms, until seven days after the onset of symptoms.

What can I do to protect myself from getting sick?

An international collaborative effort is underway to produce a vaccine for swine flu. In the meantime, there are steps you can take to protect your health and the health of others.

You should:

Wash your hands often with soap and water and dry them thoroughly. Alcohol-based hand cleaners are also effective. Avoid touching your eyes, nose or mouth as germs spread this way.
Try to avoid close contact with people you know to be sick.
Reduce time spent in crowded settings.

What should I do if I get sick?

Ring ahead to let your GP know you have influenza-like symptoms, or call Healthline on 0800-611-116. Stay home for the duration of your symptoms (around seven days) to prevent spreading the virus to others.

Contact your work to let them know that you are unwell and will be away from work.

The WHO also suggests that if you have influenza you should:

- rest and take plenty of fluids;
- cover your nose and mouth when coughing and sneezing and, if using tissues, make sure you dispose of them carefully. Clean your hands immediately after with soap and water or cleanse them with an alcohol-based hand rub;
- if you do not have a tissue close by when you cough or sneeze, cover your mouth as much as possible with the crook of your elbow;
- if you have some, you could use a mask to help you contain the spread of droplets when you are around others, but be sure to use the mask correctly;
- inform family and friends about your illness and try to avoid close contact with other people.