

Frequently asked questions about influenza and pandemic influenza (swine flu)

What is influenza?

Influenza is an infectious illness caused by a virus. It is primarily spread from person to person by breathing in of droplets formed during coughing and sneezing, or by direct contact with articles, such as used tissues, contaminated with respiratory secretions.

Influenza usually begins suddenly and can include fever, chills, tiredness, headache, muscle aches, non-productive cough, runny nose, sore throat and mild conjunctivitis (infection of the eye). It is different from the common cold.

The influenza viruses that circulate in the community can change from year to year. Occasionally influenza viruses emerge that are completely new, and can cause global pandemics. This is what we have seen recently with Pandemic Influenza H1N1 2009 (swine flu). This virus is likely to again be the predominant strain in New Zealand in 2010.

The clinical definition of influenza includes the following criteria.

- Fever greater or equal to 38°C
- At least one respiratory symptom - cough, sore throat, nasal symptoms such as a runny nose
- At least one systemic symptom - headache, aches/pains, sweats/chills/feeling feverish, tiredness.

What is pandemic influenza or swine flu?

The current pandemic is sometimes referred to as swine flu. A report from the World Health Organization states that as of 31 January 2010, worldwide more than 209 countries and overseas territories or communities have reported laboratory confirmed cases of pandemic influenza H1N1 2009, including at least 15,174 deaths.¹

The virus was first detected in people in Mexico and the United States in April 2009. It may have been circulating in Mexico for some weeks before that. By

¹ World Health Organization Pandemic (H1N1) 2009 - update 86, which can be accessed from: http://www.who.int/csr/don/2010_02_5/en/index.html

early June 2009, over 70 countries had reported people who had at some time been sick with the new virus.

The new pandemic influenza can spread from person to person, in the same way that regular seasonal influenza viruses spread. It is a different strain of influenza from the seasonal viruses which have previously circulated around New Zealand in winter. The new pandemic influenza has developed from the re-assortment of a number of other influenza viruses.

What are the health risk factors or ways you can catch influenza?

All strains of influenza, including Pandemic Influenza H1N1 2009 (swine flu), are spread in the community in the same way.

The main form of spread is through the coughs or sneezes of an infected person. Infected droplets are released into the air and breathed in by others. However, these droplets do not remain in the air for long and generally only affect people within a two metre radius.

It is also possible to get influenza by touching contaminated surfaces, and then touching your nose, mouth or eyes.

Chlorine in drinking water makes it very unlikely that you will get influenza from drinking water or swimming in chlorinated pools.

Even though it is sometimes called swine flu, the new Pandemic Influenza H1N1 2009 virus is not spread by eating cooked pork or handling raw pork products.

Good hygiene practices such as covering your coughs and sneezes, hand washing with soap and water followed by drying them thoroughly, staying away from sick people and from others if you are ill, are important things you can do to stop the spread and limit your exposure to influenza viruses.

What health risk factors could lead to serious health complications from influenza or pandemic influenza?

People who have a greater chance of developing serious influenza complications include:

- Children younger than two years old*
- Adults 65 years and older
- Pregnant women
- People with certain chronic medical conditions (such as asthma, heart failure, chronic lung disease) and people with a weak immune system (such as diabetes, HIV)
- People who are morbidly obese

- People younger than 19 years of age who are receiving long-term aspirin therapy.

*It is also important to know that children aged two to four also have a higher rate of complications compared to older children, although the risk for these children is lower than the risk for children younger than two years.

I'm pregnant, why am I at higher risk from Pandemic Influenza H1N1 2009 (swine flu)?

You are at higher risk because studies have shown that all pregnant women are at greater risk from complications associated with influenza illness, from both Pandemic Influenza and other influenza strains.

Furthermore influenza vaccination of pregnant women has been shown to decrease the incidence of influenza in their new-born babies.

Pregnant women with coexisting medical conditions such as asthma or diabetes are at even greater risk of severe influenza-related illness, with a three to four times higher risk of having severe influenza.

Maternal influenza infection has been associated with an increased risk of maternal hospitalisation, fetal malformations and other illnesses.

Influenza infection in young infants often prompts hospitalisation and can predispose infants to pneumonia or ear infections.

I've heard that many people over 65 are already immune to Pandemic Influenza H1N1 2009 (swine flu). Should I get the influenza vaccine this year?

Individuals 65 years and older are not expected to be at higher risk from Pandemic Influenza H1N1 2009 (swine flu) as they are likely to have some pre-existing immunity.

However they do remain at risk from seasonal influenza strains so it's recommended they have the seasonal influenza vaccine every year when it is available from their doctor or nurse.

For older people living in the community, influenza vaccine is associated with a 26 percent reduction in risk of hospitalisation for influenza or pneumonia and 42 percent reduction in the risk of death.

Does taking Tamiflu and being vaccinated improve my chances of avoiding influenza? Or is vaccination enough?

Tamiflu or Relenza are antiviral medicines that may be used to treat an influenza infection if given early in the illness or to prevent the influenza infection in some special circumstances during the period when the medicine is taken. Antiviral drugs cannot guarantee protection from influenza.

Vaccination is your best protection against the prevalent strains of influenza that may be circulating in the community.

Who can I talk to for more advice about this?

Speak to your doctor or practice nurse about getting vaccinated or phone the immunisation advice line 0800 IMMUNE (466863).