Alberta Health Services

Swine Influenza – Questions and Answers for Schools (April 29, 2009)

Background

There have been a small number of confirmed cases of human swine influenza in Alberta. Human swine influenza has been recognized as the cause of respiratory illness including some severe illness in Mexico. Related cases of mild human swine Flu have been recognized in many countries, including Canada. The situation continues to evolve rapidly and the advice provided below may change as new information becomes available.

Swine flu illness outside Mexico has generally been mild to date, much like usual seasonal influenza. Today the United States is reporting one death in Texas related to human swine influenza. No further details have been released.

1. What is 'Swine Influenza' (swine flu)?

The virus which is called 'swine flu' is a new strain of influenza A which can be transmitted from person to person. New strains of seasonal influenza A circulate every year in flu season.

2. How is swine flu spread?

Human-to-human spread of swine influenza is thought to happen the same way as seasonal influenza and other respiratory infections. When the infected person coughs and sneezes, the viruses are released into the air where they can be breathed in by others. Viruses can also remain on hard surfaces like counters and doorknobs, where they can be picked up on hands and spread when someone touches their eyes, mouth and/or nose.

3. What are the symptoms of swine flu in humans?

In countries outside of Mexico, including Canada, symptoms of swine influenza in people are similar to the symptoms of regular human seasonal influenza infection and include fever, cough, muscle aches, lethargy, and lack of appetite. Some people with swine flu have also reported runny nose, sore throat, nausea, vomiting and diarrhea. The vast majority of cases outside Canada recover completely.

The current outbreak in Mexico seems to be associated with pneumonia and other severe lung problems, as well as the milder forms of influenza.

4. What is the incubation period for swine influenza?

People usually develop symptoms of influenza from 1–3 days after becoming infected. However, there have been some variations in the onset in the various cases seen in Mexico, US and Canada and Public Health is giving up to 10 days to watch for symptoms to show up.

5. How long is a person contagious if they develop swine influenza?

With most influenzas, you are most contagious for the first 3-5 days, but health officials are asking people with symptoms to stay home **until symptoms have resolved** as an precautionary measure.

The infectious period for a confirmed case of swine influenza has been defined as 1 day prior to the onset of illness in the case to 7 days after the onset of illness.

6. What do we do if we have students or staff returning from Mexico or other affected areas?:

(i) less than 10 days ago and have been ill with flu like symptoms?

Students or staff that are ill with a respiratory infection with a fever greater than 38ºC and a new cough should stay home from school and work until the symptoms have resolved. Self care including avoiding contact with others, cough etiquette, increased hand washing and rest should be implemented.

If symptoms are severe or not improving, call your physician to request an appointment, and make sure to tell him / her about travel history when making the appointment.

If the doctor sends you home, you should stay home until the symptoms have resolved. If you later become short of breath or develop other symptoms of severe illness, you should contact your physician or go to an emergency department and make sure the healthcare workers there are informed of your travel history.

If you require Emergency Room care, tell the triage nurse when you arrive that you have respiratory symptoms and have recently travelled.

(ii) more than 10 days ago and have NOT been ill?

These students and staff are at no increased risk and no further action is required.

(iii) and developed symptoms more than 10 days after having returned?

Your illness is likely locally acquired and you can continue with usual self care measures. Consider staying home until you are well and protect others, as you would with usual respiratory illness.

7. If students or staff have recently returned from Mexico and have no symptoms, do they need to stay home from school / work?

If you are well, no further action is needed. You can go to work / school etc. however staff and parents should be monitoring themselves and their children for symptoms of influenza illness, practicing self care at home and consulting their physician as necessary. Stay home if you develop respiratory symptoms within 10 days of returning from Mexico.

8. Do students or staff with symptoms need to be tested?

It is not necessary for those with mild illness to be tested. For those with more severe symptoms, consult your physician who will assess and test if needed.

9. What do we do if have sick kids attending school but we do not know their travel history?

Sick kids should be managed as usual, practice good hand washing and taught to cover their cough / sneeze with their sleeve. Schools may decide for their own reasons to temporarily ask ill students and staff to stay home in view of the current situation.

10. Where do we direct parents that are phoning the school for more information?

Parents can call Health Link Alberta 1(866) 408-5465 for more information. They can also get more information regarding self-care at http://www.health.Alberta.ca/health-info/influenza-how-to-care.html

11. Should field trips within province or out of province be cancelled at this time?

From a public health perspective, there is no reason for field trips scheduled within or out of province but within Canada to be cancelled at this time. However, large gatherings linked to settings or schools with laboratory-confirmed cases should be cancelled, for example a school event linked to a school with cases.
Schools may decide for their own reasons to make additional recommendations or changes to their travel policy.

12. For out of country / international field trips that are scheduled

Schools should be regularly checking for any new travel advisories or updated information from the Public Health Agency of Canada at www.phac-aspc.gc.ca.

13. Do staff need to wear N95 masks in a room with sick students or staff?

No. N95 masks are not indicated at this time. Routine precautions to stop the spread of influenza are strongly recommended. This includes increased hand washing, covering your cough / sneeze with your sleeve and avoiding close contact with others if you have symptoms.

14. Where can we find updates and information on swine flu?

For more information regarding swine flu, you can call Alberta Health Link for information at 1(866) 408-5465.

For more information about self-care visit http://www.health.Alberta.ca/health-info/influenza-how-to-care.html