

Swine Flu, Should I Be Worried?

By Lisa Schilling RN

The media has certainly made the public aware of the recent outbreak of swine flu. But what does that really mean for you and me? For a long time we have known that there is the potential for a flu pandemic to occur. A pandemic is considered to be a disease or illness that exists in a widespread form that affects people in many different countries. Recently there has been the bird flu outbreak in Asia. This particular strain of flu, that they are calling “swine flu”, seems to be a rare combination of viruses called H1N1. It has different properties than recent strains of flu and therefore people have no natural immunity to it. It cannot be spread through eating pork. It is a person to person virus only. The flu shot vaccine, from this years supply, will not affect this strain of flu.

Things to keep in mind:

- This virus is spread through respiratory droplets, when someone coughs or sneezes.
- It can be spread through the air when you breathe it in.
- It can live on hard surfaces and on your hands, making it very easy to carry from person to person.
- It is highly contagious, meaning you can contract the virus easily.
- The main routes of transmission include the mouth, nose and eyes. Keep hands away from these areas.
- Symptoms should appear within 48 hours of exposure.
- Cases cannot be confirmed right away, so there may be more cases than noted.
- Anyone is susceptible to this virus, not just the young, old and infirmed.
- Taking personal precautions as a rule will greatly reduce your chances of contracting this illness.
- Antiviral medications (Tamiflu, Relenza) from your doctor, can be taken to reduce the duration and severity of the illness when taken with the first 48 hours of the onset of symptoms.

The epicenter for this outbreak seems to have been Mexico, with numerous swine flu

related deaths now reported. We are beginning to have confirmed cases here in the United States as well. With the media attention, and the potential for rapid spread, many have become concerned about their own personal safety. While the swine flu seems to be highly contagious, the same precautions need to be followed that you have heard for years.

Here are the top ten ways you can protect yourself.

#1 **Wash your hands!** Wash or sanitize before eating, after restroom use and often in between.

#2 Keep your hands off of your face (especially eyes, nose and mouth).

#3 Cover your cough (ideally cough into your sleeve at the crook of your elbow).

#4 Dispose of tissues properly and then wash your hands.

#5 Keep at least an arms distance (three feet is recommended) between you and anyone known to be ill.

#6 Avoid crowded events and gatherings when possible. Wear a mask if you are concerned.

#7 Wash hard surfaces regularly with a sanitizer or bleach solution (tables, light switches, faucet handles, key boards, phones, door knobs and etc.)

#8 Keep your immune system strong by eating properly, exercising, getting adequate rest, and proper vitamin and mineral supplementation.

9# Stay home when you are ill with a fever and respiratory complications.

10# If you become severely ill with fever and massive aches and fatigue, seek medical attention within the first 48 hours of the onset of symptoms (earlier the better) to seek an antiviral medication. This can reduce the severity of symptoms and the duration of the illness.

The bottom line is that this is a serious illness, however by understanding how the virus is spread and taking proper precautions you can keep yourself healthy. Even if you are unfortunate enough to contract the illness, by seeking medical attention early, your chances of getting through the illness without problems is very good. Remember that knowledge is power. Be proactive. Don't wait to see if you get ill, take precautions to avoid it. Be empowered! Use what you know to stay well.