

Prevention is the best precaution

Swine Flu

Before the onset of flu symptoms such as coughing, high temperature and feeling generally unwell, try to take precautions against Swine Flu.



Cover your mouth and nose with a tissue when sneezing or coughing, and throw it away carefully.



Wash your hands regularly using soap and water.



Use the health services responsibly.

What is flu?

Since time immemorial, flu has been a disease which affects people and animals (birds, pigs, etc) and causes epidemics every year, especially during the winter months. This illness is caused by various types of virus, which may also combine with each other to produce new types of flu.

Flu is extremely contagious since it is transmitted easily from person to person through minute saliva droplets or secretions produced when we speak, cough or sneeze.

The common symptoms of flu are:

- temperature (over 38°C or 100.4°F)
- cough
- and generally feeling unwell.

It can also cause headaches, sore throat, sneezing, aching muscles and sometimes diarrhoea and vomiting.



Why do we need to keep you informed now?

Occasionally viruses can change into strains which are very different from those which existed in previous years, and against which we have fewer defences because they are new. This causes more people than usual to be affected. Everybody can catch flu.

Throughout history there have been flu pandemics, such as the one which occurred in 1918, known as Spanish flu. That pandemic resulted in many deaths since the health systems we have today did not exist at that time, and that strain was also particularly virulent.

The present pandemic is caused by a new sub-type of the Swine flu virus (H1N1), and so far it has been a mild strain, although this could change over the coming months.

Who should take special care?

The people most likely to suffer complications are...

People of any age with:

- Heart disease (except hypertension).
- Chronic respiratory illnesses.
- Diabetes being treated with medication.
- Moderate to serious kidney dysfunction.
- Diseases of the blood such as hemoglobinopathies or anaemia if these are moderate or serious.
- People without a spleen.
- People with advanced chronic liver disease.
- Serious neuromuscular diseases.
- Suppressed immune system (whether by HIV-AIDS, or secondary to drugs, or in transplanted people)
- Morbid obesity (body mass index of 40 or above)

People under 18 receiving long-term treatment with acetylsalicylic acid (aspirin).

Pregnant women, as during pregnancy the immune system is naturally inhibited which increases the possibility of catching flu and perhaps developing complications.

If you are pregnant, do not be alarmed; the risk is low and most pregnant women who have had swine flu have developed only mild symptoms. It is important to take extra care with hygiene and follow the general recommendations. At the onset of fever you should bring your temperature down as soon as possible by taking paracetamol (a safe treatment during pregnancy) and contact the health services as soon as possible.

Until now, **healthy people over 65** have not been shown to be at greater risk of developing complications. Studies have indicated that they have a certain degree of protection, probably because of having been exposed to viruses with similar characteristics in the past.

It is possible that in the future, when we have more data available on the pandemic, we will be able to identify other groups of the population with a greater risk of developing complications.

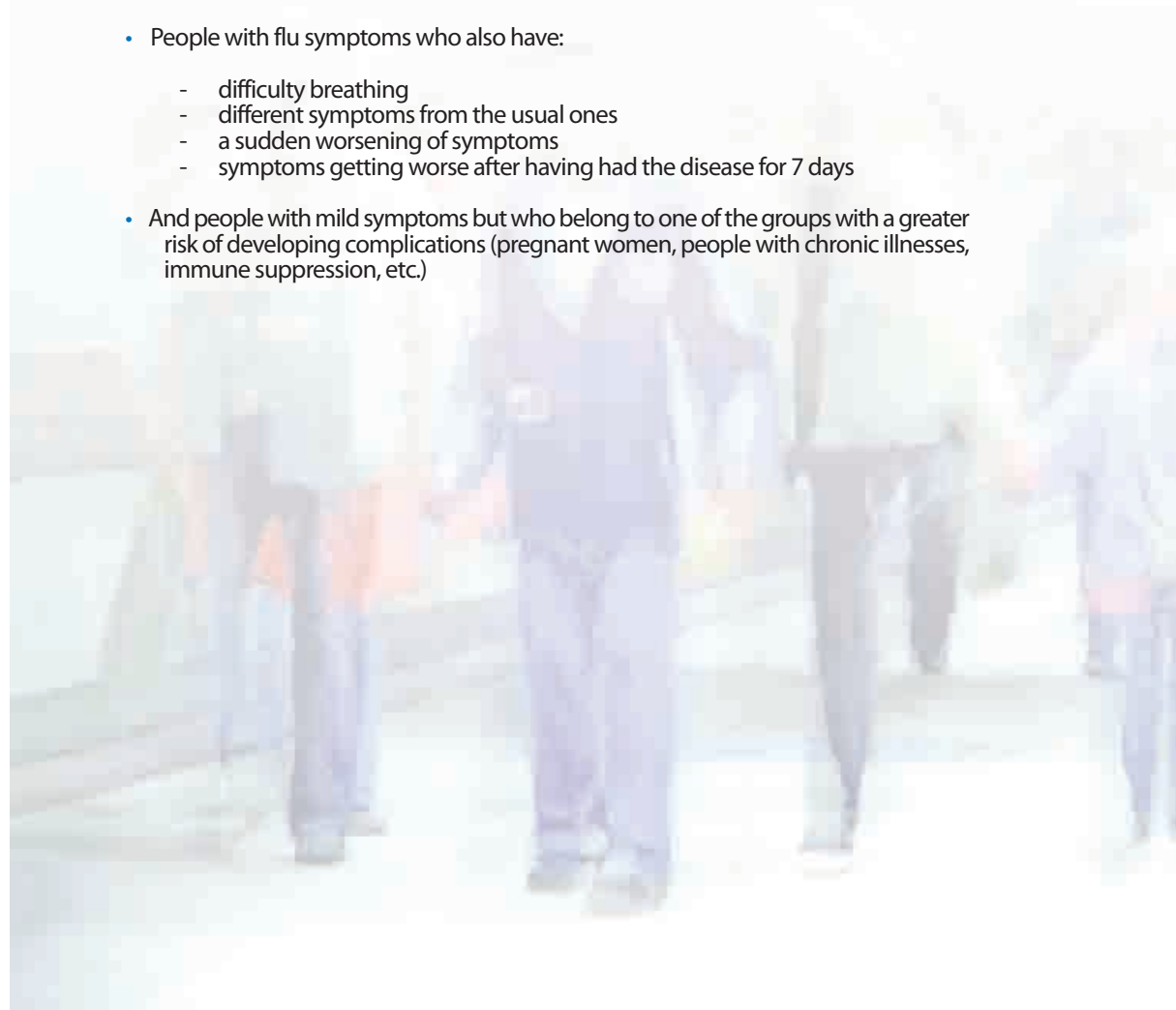
What should you do if you have flu symptoms?

So far most cases of the new Swine flu virus (H1N1) have been mild with minor symptoms and few complications. This means that most patients are able to recover from the flu at home with appropriate care from the healthcare services, if required, and without the need for hospital treatment.

In most cases people will recover from flu by following the usual steps: drink plenty of liquids (water, fruit juice, etc.), take the normal fever reducing tablets and painkillers such as paracetamol and follow the health authorities' recommendations until they have fully recovered to avoid infecting other people. It is important to take extreme care with hygiene.

Nevertheless, the following people should contact their local health service as soon as possible according to the directions given in each Autonomous Region:

- People with flu symptoms who also have:
 - difficulty breathing
 - different symptoms from the usual ones
 - a sudden worsening of symptoms
 - symptoms getting worse after having had the disease for 7 days
- And people with mild symptoms but who belong to one of the groups with a greater risk of developing complications (pregnant women, people with chronic illnesses, immune suppression, etc.)



What are the antiviral drugs and the vaccine for?

The drugs used to treat the flu, as established by standard health procedure, are called antivirals. There are two treatments: oseltamivir (sold under the trade name of Tamiflu) and zanamivir (trade name Relenza). Neither of these treatments cures the flu. They work by shortening the duration of the illness by approximately one day and reducing the risk of complications. For this reason they are currently only recommended for people with flu requiring hospital treatment and for those currently considered to be more likely to suffer complications.

In these cases, when flu is diagnosed, it is considered that the benefit they receive from being given these drugs is greater than the risk of possible adverse effects from any of the medications.

Since both Tamiflu and Relenza have side effects and contraindications, only a doctor should decide when they should be taken. Groups of experts are continually reviewing the protocols and the recommendations for treatment.

The vaccine for the new Swine flu (H1N1) is expected to be available by the end of the year. Even if it is ready before, it needs to be tested for its effectiveness and to discover any problems it may generate, as occurs with all vaccines.

The vaccine does not always prevent the illness, but it gives a degree of protection against it and reduces the risk of complications.

By the time the new vaccine becomes available, the groups requiring vaccination in order to avoid the complications of this disease will have been identified by the National Health Service.

What is seasonal flu?

There is usually an outbreak of seasonal flu each year during the winter months. Every year people die from the complications arising from normal flu and it is therefore recommended that people at greater risk should be vaccinated against the disease.

Seasonal flu is also expected again this year. Many people are already protected because they have built up their defences in previous years. Nevertheless, as every year, there will be a vaccination campaign directed at the usual high risk groups.

This campaign will take place during the same months as usual, and once the dates have been decided, detailed information will be available about the exact dates and the high risk groups it is aimed at.

Although the seasonal flu vaccine does not protect against the new Swine flu virus (H1N1), it is highly advisable for any person belonging to the groups at risk to be vaccinated, as they should be every year.

Outbreaks of both types of flu could occur at the same time.

What are the Health and Social Policy Ministry and the Autonomous Regions Health Departments doing?

They have had a Plan to prepare for and respond to a flu pandemic for a number of years. Committees and Sub-committees of Experts have been working for several months on the development and updating of specific protocols for monitoring pandemics, and on proposing and implementing both medical and social measures to help to deal with them.

Spain has enough antiviral drugs to treat 15 million people. They will be made available to any person who needs them, once they have been evaluated by healthcare professionals.

The Government, with the unanimous agreement of all Autonomous Regions, has ordered vaccines for the new Swine flu virus (H1N1) for 18 million people. This figure has been calculated taking account of the population with the greatest risk of developing complications and of the numbers working in the services which are essential to society if there should be an outbreak.

Our National Health Service is prepared to deal with the situation, continually adopting appropriate measures, while all Government bodies are working together.

What can we do to prevent it?

Prevention is the best way to deal with flu and consists of a series of hygiene recommendations. Among these the most important are:



- Wash your hands regularly.



- Cover your mouth and nose with a tissue when sneezing and coughing, and throw it away immediately.



- Clean the surfaces of furniture, door handles and other objects frequently with normal cleaning products and ventilate rooms more often by opening the windows.



- If you are ill, avoid passing on the flu to other people by following the advice of health professionals.
- Avoid kissing and close contact, such as sharing glasses, cutlery and other objects which may have been in contact with saliva or other fluids.

Why is the cooperation of the public necessary?

It is expected that at some time a peak may occur in the pandemic, when many people could be affected at the same time. A small proportion of these will require medical supervision or need hospital treatment.

In order to avoid overcrowding, it is important that only those persons who really need public health care should use it.



Use the health services responsibly.



We should bear in mind that during this time, other illnesses requiring urgent treatment such as heart attacks, strokes, broken limbs, appendicitis, etc., will still be occurring. For this reason it is important to use the health services responsibly and to follow the recommendations issued by your Autonomous Region.

And remember... Prevention is the best precaution

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