

Swine (H1N1) Flu: 10 Things You Need to Know

By Mike Stobbe

ASSOCIATED PRESS

Sunday, September 06, 2009

ATLANTA — Since it first emerged in April, the global swine flu epidemic has sickened more than 1 million Americans and killed about 500. It's also spread around the world, infecting tens of thousands and killing nearly 2,000.

This summer, the virus has been surprisingly tenacious in the U.S., refusing to fade away as flu viruses usually do. And health officials predict a surge of cases this fall, perhaps very soon as schools reopen.

A White House report from an expert panel suggests that from 30 percent to half the population could catch swine flu during the course of this pandemic and that between 30,000 and 90,000 could die.

So how worried should you be and how do you prepare? The Associated Press has tried to boil down the mass of information into 10 things you should know to be flu-savvy, based on information from the U.S. Centers for Disease Control and Prevention and the New York City Department of Health and Mental Hygiene.

1. No cause for panic.

Swine flu isn't much more threatening than regular seasonal flu.

During the few months of this new flu's existence, hospitalizations and deaths from it seem to be lower than the average seen for seasonal flu, and the virus hasn't dramatically mutated. That's what health officials have observed in the Southern Hemisphere where flu season is now winding down.

Still, more people are susceptible to swine flu and U.S. health officials are worried because it hung in so firmly here during the summer — a time of year the flu usually goes away.

2. Virus tougher on some.

Swine flu is more of a threat to certain groups — children under 2, pregnant women, people with health problems like asthma, diabetes and heart disease. Teens and young adults also are more vulnerable to swine flu.

Ordinary, seasonal flu hits older people the hardest, but not swine flu. Scientists say older people may have some immunity from exposure years earlier to viruses similar to swine flu.

3. Wash your hands often and long.

Like seasonal flu, swine flu spreads through the coughs and sneezes of people who are sick. Emphasize to children that they should wash with soap and water long enough to finish singing the entire alphabet song, ending with "Now I know my ABC's..." Also use hand sanitizers.

4. Get the kids vaccinated.

These groups should be first in line for swine flu shots, especially if vaccine supplies are limited: those 6 months to 24 years old, pregnant women and health care workers.

Also a priority: Parents and caregivers of infants and people with those high-risk medical conditions previously noted.

5. Get your shots early.

Millions of swine flu shots should be available by October. If you are in one of the priority groups, try to get your shot as early as possible.

Check with your doctor or local or state health department about where to do this.

6. Immunity takes awhile.

Even those first in line for shots won't have immunity until around Thanksgiving.

That's because it's likely to take two shots, given three weeks apart, to provide protection. And it takes a week or two after the last shot for the vaccine to take full effect.

The regular seasonal flu shot should be widely available in September. People over 50 are urged to be among the first to get that shot.

7. Vaccines are being tested.

Health officials presume the swine flu vaccine is safe and effective, but they're testing it to make sure.

The federal government has begun studies in eight cities across the country to assess its effectiveness and figure out the best dose. Vaccine makers are doing their own tests as well.

8. Help! Surrounded by swine flu.

If an outbreak of swine flu hits your area before you're vaccinated, be extra cautious.

Stay away from public gathering places like malls, sports events and churches. Try to keep your distance from people in general. Keep washing those hands and keep your hands away from your eyes, nose and mouth.

9. What if you get sick?

If you have other health problems or are pregnant and develop flu-like symptoms, call your doctor right away. You might be prescribed Tamiflu or Relenza. These drugs can reduce the severity of swine flu if taken right after symptoms start.

If you develop breathing problems (rapid breathing for kids), pain in your chest, constant vomiting or a fever that keeps rising, go to an emergency room.

Most people, though, should just stay home and rest. Cough into your elbow or shoulder. Stay home for at least 24 hours after your fever breaks. Fluids and pain relievers like Tylenol can help with achiness and fever. Always check with a doctor before giving children any medicines. Adult cold and flu remedies are not for them.

10. No swine flu from barbecue.

You can't catch swine flu from pork — or poultry either (even though it recently turned up in turkeys in Chile). Swine flu is not spread by handling meat, whether it's raw or cooked.

On the Net: CDC swine flu basics: <http://bit.ly/2G7ugl>

New York City Department of Health and Mental Hygiene's FAQs: <http://bit.ly/mSZKJ>