

SSRC FELLOWSHIP ADVISORY REGARDING THE SWINE FLU OUTBREAK

Updated June 11, 2009

The SSRC has been monitoring the outbreak of Influenza A(H1N1) (swine flu) and the responses of the U.S. government, the World Health Institute and the U.S. Centers for Disease Control and Prevention. The World Health Institute recently raised the current level of influenza pandemic to phase 6, indicating widespread human infection. Note that the phase 6 designation is not a comment on the severity of the pandemic, which the WHO has categorized as “moderate.” We would like to ask that all fellows keep informed on the progress of the flu in their area and regularly check the Web sites of the World Health Institute (<http://www.who.int/csr/disease/swineflu/en/index.html>) and, for those in the U.S., the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (www.cdc.gov/h1n1flu) for the most up to date information.

Fellows doing fieldwork in affected areas or planning to travel in the next month should monitor regional responses to the outbreak and plan accordingly. As of May 7, 2009, WHO is not currently recommending travel restrictions related to the outbreak; however, please take necessary precautions.

For your convenience, advice from WHO on how to prevent illness is included below.
http://www.who.int/csr/disease/swineflu/frequently_asked_questions/what/en/index.html

What can I do?

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What can I do to protect myself from catching influenza A(H1N1)?

The main route of transmission of the new influenza A(H1N1) virus seems to be similar to seasonal influenza, via droplets that are expelled by speaking, sneezing or coughing. You can prevent getting infected by avoiding close contact with people who show influenza-like symptoms (trying to maintain a distance of about 1 meter if possible) and taking the following measures:

- avoid touching your mouth and nose;
- clean hands thoroughly with soap and water, or cleanse them with an alcohol-based hand rub on a regular basis (especially if touching the mouth and nose, or surfaces that are potentially contaminated);
- avoid close contact with people who might be ill;
- reduce the time spent in crowded settings if possible;
- improve airflow in your living space by opening windows;
- practice good health habits including adequate sleep, eating nutritious food, and keeping physically active.

What about using a mask? What does WHO recommend?

If you are not sick you do not have to wear a mask.

If you are caring for a sick person, you can wear a mask when you are in close contact with the ill person and dispose of it immediately after contact, and cleanse your hands thoroughly afterwards.

If you are sick and must travel or be around others, cover your mouth and nose.

Using a mask correctly in all situations is essential. Incorrect use actually increases the chance of spreading infection.

How do I know if I have influenza A(H1N1)?

You will not be able to tell the difference between seasonal flu and influenza A(H1N1) without medical help. Typical symptoms to watch for are similar to seasonal viruses and include fever, cough, headache, body aches, sore throat and runny nose. Only your medical practitioner and local health authority can confirm a case of influenza A(H1N1).

What should I do if I think I have the illness?

If you feel unwell, have high fever, cough or sore throat:

- stay at home and keep away from work, school or crowds;
- rest and take plenty of fluids;
- cover your nose and mouth when coughing and sneezing and, if using tissues, make sure you dispose of them carefully. Clean your hands immediately after with soap and water or cleanse them with an alcohol-based hand rub;
- if you do not have a tissue close by when you cough or sneeze, cover your mouth as much as possible with the crook of your elbow;
- use a mask to help you contain the spread of droplets when you are around others, but be sure to do so correctly;
- inform family and friends about your illness and try to avoid contact with other people;
- If possible, contact a health professional before traveling to a health facility to discuss whether a medical examination is necessary.

Should I take an antiviral now just in case I catch the new virus?

No. You should only take an antiviral, such as oseltamivir or zanamivir, if your health care provider advises you to do so. Individuals should not buy medicines to prevent or

fight this new influenza without a prescription, and they should exercise caution in buying antivirals over the Internet.

What about breastfeeding? Should I stop if I am ill?

No, not unless your health care provider advises it. Studies on other influenza infections show that breastfeeding is most likely protective for babies - it passes on helpful maternal immunities and lowers the risk of respiratory disease. Breastfeeding provides the best overall nutrition for babies and increases their defense factors to fight illness.

When should someone seek medical care?

A person should seek medical care if they experience shortness of breath or difficulty breathing, or if a fever continues more than three days. For parents with a young child who is ill, seek medical care if a child has fast or labored breathing, continuing fever or convulsions (seizures).

Supportive care at home - resting, drinking plenty of fluids and using a pain reliever for aches - is adequate for recovery in most cases. (A non-aspirin pain reliever should be used by children and young adults because of the risk of Reye's syndrome.)

Should I go to work if I have the flu but am feeling OK?

No. Whether you have influenza A(H1N1) or a seasonal influenza, you should stay home and away from work through the duration of your symptoms. This is a precaution that can protect your work colleagues and others.

Can I travel?

If you are feeling unwell or have symptoms of influenza, you should not travel. If you have any doubts about your health, you should check with your health care provider.