

Patient Information Swine Flu

During the week of April 20, 2009, major news outlets began to report on Swine Flu, a form of the influenza virus. Swine flu appears to have started in Mexico where several thousand people have become infected and over one hundred are reported to have died. In the United States, less than one hundred cases have been reported during the month of April and all of the infected people recovered fully. A number of countries around the world have also reported scattered cases of Swine flu. We don't know yet how serious this situation is. This may be a minor outbreak of simple late-season flu, or this could be the start of a severe outbreak of influenza infecting people worldwide. Information is coming in daily on this situation from the World Health Organization and the US Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC).

What is Swine Flu?

Swine Flu is a form of influenza that started in pigs. Parts of the pig virus have made their way into human influenza viruses to create a new, mutated form of human influenza. This is a different strain of flu from what we had circulating during the recent winter season.

What are the symptoms of Swine flu?

Symptoms of the Swine Flu are the same as the yearly winter-time flu: fever, cough, sore throat, headache, muscle aches and fatigue. Some people may also have some vomiting or diarrhea along with these symptoms. Most people with the flu are sick for 3-5 days.

How dangerous is this?

So far this form of flu has not been any more dangerous in humans in the United States than the usual forms of flu that we see every winter. We do not yet understand why the people of Mexico are experiencing more severe illness.

Is this virus in the Augusta region?

As of April 27, there is no confirmed Swine flu in Georgia. Physicians at the Medical College of Georgia and other medical facilities are monitoring for flu activity and reporting to the state health department in Atlanta. If Swine Flu is detected in the area, the public will be notified.

What treatments are available?

Antiviral medications such as Tamiflu and Relenza can shorten the number of days of flu symptoms by 24-36 hours. However, most experts do not recommend antiviral medications for otherwise healthy people who become infected with flu since most recover without any specific treatments. Antiviral medications are generally recommended only for people with likely influenza who are over the age of 65 or who have serious, chronic medical conditions such as: severe asthma or chronic lung disease; dialysis for kidney failure; problems with the immune system such as organ transplant patients, cancer patients on chemotherapy or patients with HIV; patients permanently confined to bed and patients with severe muscle weakness problems that make breathing difficult.

What about antibiotics? Won't they help?

Antibiotics are helpful only for illnesses caused by bacteria, such as Strep Throat or urine infections. Antibiotics are useless against viruses. Flu is a virus. Antibiotics should not be prescribed for people with simple flu since these medications do not help and may make the illness worse. If your doctor believes you have a complication of the flu such as a pneumonia caused by bacteria that are infecting on top of the virus, then antibiotics may be necessary.

Should I see my doctor if I suspect I have flu?

Most people with influenza who are under age 65 without serious health problems do not need medical attention from a health professional such as a doctor or nurse. Most people with flu can care for themselves at home with bedrest, fluids and fever lowering medications such as Tylenol or Motrin.

When should I see my doctor?

You should contact your doctor if you have a fever with a cough or a sore throat and you have one of the serious illnesses listed above; if you have flu symptoms and you are over age 65; if you have flu that is not getting better after 4-5 days; if you have flu and are having difficulty breathing or you are dizzy after standing for several minutes.

What can be done to prevent the spread of this virus?

Influenza is spread from person to person, so the more you stay away from other people, the less likely it is that you will be exposed to flu. Avoid touching your eyes, nose or mouth with your hands because if the virus is on your hands you may infect yourself. Soap and water or an alcohol based hand cleanser kill the

virus, so frequent hand washing is helpful. Do not attend work or school if you have a respiratory illness with fever. Flu can be spread from the infected person starting one day before the illness begins to seven days after (10 days in children). Infected people should stay and avoid public places except to see a doctor.

Where can I get more information about Swine Flu and seasonal flu?

The CDC maintains an excellent web site on influenza at www.cdc.gov/flu/ . Click on Swine Influenza under "What's New and Updated". This site is updated daily.