

# Pandemic Flu Advice

## Introduction

A pandemic is a global disease outbreak. A flu pandemic occurs when a new influenza virus emerges for which people have little or no immunity. The disease spreads easily from person to person and the illness can sweep around the world in weeks. In past pandemics, the scale and severity of the illness has been variable but broadly of a higher order than even the most severe winter epidemics (a severe outbreak of a disease confined to one area or country) of seasonal flu.

Significantly there are also changes in the age distribution of cases compared to non-pandemic years and serious illness and deaths can occur in the younger (teens to mid-twenties) and otherwise healthy age groups.

## Sources of Updated Information

Swine flu has spread across the world since emerging in Mexico and is now officially the first flu pandemic for 40 years. In the early weeks of the pandemic, we endeavoured to maintain regular "news updates" to the University community, but this has now been overtaken by the plethora of authoritative sources of updated information regarding the spread and the severity of this flu pandemic, within Scotland, UK and worldwide.

## Current NHS Strategy on Pandemic Flu

UK wide we are now officially in the 'treatment phase' of the emergency strategy to combat the pandemic, this means that because of the rising number of new cases attempting to contain the virus on a national basis is no longer an option. Both the UK and Scottish Governments have stressed that this change in strategy does not mean the pandemic virus is becoming more deadly, just that it can no longer be contained and the strategy must move to the treatment of those infected with more reliance on simple hygiene procedures to help prevent infection.

People suspected of having contracted the virus will no longer be tested for the virus but will instead be medically diagnosed by a GP or NHS24. Those diagnosed as having contracted the virus will be required to stay at home and will be treated with antiviral drugs at the discretion of the doctor, but there will be no attempt at preventive treatment of close contacts by supply of antiviral drugs and there will be no attempt to trace contacts. Contacts who are not themselves showing symptoms should no longer stay at home but should continue their normal daily life, including attending their place of work.

It is recognised that a number of underlying medical conditions can increase a persons risk from flu, therefore anyone who is exhibiting flu like symptoms, or is a close contact of someone who has been diagnosed as having flu, and has existing:

- chronic respiratory disease (including asthma that requires treatment with inhalers, or has required hospitalisation)
- chronic heart disease
- chronic kidney disease
- chronic liver disease
- chronic neurological disease
- immunosuppression (whether caused by disease or treatment)
- diabetes mellitus,
- or is
- pregnant

should contact their GP by telephone immediately for advice.

### **Clarification of guidelines to expectant mothers**

There has been recently, conflicting or somewhat confusing, guidance given by some government and other agencies re what expectant mothers should do during the pandemic to minimise risk of infection. The NHS Choices website offers some clarification:

"If you are pregnant, you can reduce your risk of infection by avoiding unnecessary travel and avoiding crowds where possible. Pregnant women should also follow the general hygiene advice." Unnecessary is the important word here, the advice on travel and crowds is to follow a common-sense approach. If you have to get a train or bus every day to get to work, then carry on - you should not stop work because of swine flu. Equally, it is sensible to avoid crowds where possible, but this is very difficult if you live or work in a city.

Because of a suppressed immune system pregnant women are slightly more susceptible to all infections, including flu. There is also a slightly increased risk of complications from swine flu, but the vast majority who get infected will have a mild self-limiting illness and recover within a week. The Chief Executive of the National Childbirth Trust (NCT) said "It is important that pregnant women know that - and particularly other members of the population know that - so that they behave responsibly and if they are sick they don't go and put themselves close to a pregnant woman."

If you are a manager it may be prudent to look at the risk profile of your staff, in relation to increased susceptibility of risk of infection and where there is staff with any of the underlying medical conditions quoted above, that the practicalities of removing such employees from front line contact with members of the public is investigated.

Both the NHS and the government stress that we can all continue to do our bit in minimising the spread of the virus by simple good hygiene practices. Please read the section on Good Hygiene Principles.

History indicates that pandemics tend to occur in two or three waves and that often the intensity of effect increases with the second wave. It is therefore to be expected that a second wave of the present pandemic may occur in the autumn around the time when normal seasonal flu is more prevalent. The concern is that in the meantime the A(H1N1) strain may mutate into a more virulent strain, or in autumn / winter conditions more readily infect susceptible people. Researchers are at present working on a vaccine to combat the A(H1N1) strain and are hoping to have this available by late autumn.

## **H1N1 vaccine programme**

The national H1N1 swine flu vaccination programme has now commenced in Scotland, though there has apparently been some logistical difficulty in supplying GP practices with suitable quantities of vaccine. The intention is to vaccinate individuals who fall within "at risk" groups initially, before moving on with a programme of vaccination for the general population.

Up to date information on the vaccination programme is available on the Scottish Government www site at:

<http://www.scotland.gov.uk/Topics/Health/health/AvianInfluenza/mexicanswineflu>

If you feel you are in a High Risk group, please speak to your GP, contact NHS 24 (08454 24 24 24) or call the Swine Flu Information line (0800 1 513 513) who can give you further information.

The University's Pandemic Flu Executive Group is liaising with the Lothian Health Public Health team with regard to the vaccination programme and its relevance to both students and staff.

## **Symptoms of Influenza A (H1N1)**

The symptoms of this strain of flu are similar to those of normal seasonal flu:

Temperature >38C and two or more of the following symptoms:

- sore throat
- cough,
- runny nose,
- limb/joint pain,
- headache,
- extreme fatigue,
- lack of appetite.

Some persons who have contracted this strain of flu have also reported vomiting and diarrhoea.

NHS24 have a self help symptom checker at:

[http://www.nhs24.com/content/default.asp?page=s8\\_3&nodes=984](http://www.nhs24.com/content/default.asp?page=s8_3&nodes=984)

## **Containment of spread of disease**

The A (H1N1) strain of flu virus is contagious and transmission would appear to occur in the same manner as seasonal flu:

- Airborne – from person to person by coughing or sneezing
- Dermal contact – by touching surfaces previously contaminated by someone already infected and then touching your mouth or nose

At present advice is to follow good personal and general hygiene principals and to employ social distancing by staying at home if it has been confirmed by a doctor or NHS24 that you have contracted the virus.

## **Good hygiene principles**

- Wash your hands frequently with soap and water to reduce the risks of spreading the virus from your hands to your face or to other people.
- Cover your nose and mouth when coughing or sneezing, use a tissue whenever possible and wash your hands immediately afterwards. If a tissue is not readily available cough or sneeze into the crook of your arm rather than into your hands.
- Dispose of used tissues promptly and carefully - bag and bin them.
- Clean hard surfaces and door handles with detergent regularly
- If you share a desk or items such as telephones, keyboards, etc. (e.g. job share, shift work) it would be prudent to clean these regularly.\*

The importance of hand washing cannot be overstressed; we all unconsciously touch our mouths, noses and ears many times each day, which allows the ready transfer of cold and flu viruses from contaminated hands. See '[Hand Wash Guidance \(pdf\)](#)'. Wherever possible dry your hands using paper towels or a warm air dryer.

\* You will have to take responsibility for this type of cleaning yourself as Support Services do not have the resources to provide such extra cleaning and flu of all types is a public health issue, involving us all, rather than being solely a workplace health issue. Further, if the effect of the pandemic were to escalate from its present rate of infection then significant sickness absence may occur within Support Service staff resulting in a reduced service.

## **What to do if you have flu symptoms**

The media are reporting on a so called 'national' flu service that was set up on 23rd July, which people with flu like symptoms can contact to gain a diagnosis and a voucher to collect antiviral drugs. However, please be absolutely clear that this service only applies to England it will not be available in Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland as officials believe the demands being placed on the health services there are not as great.

If any member of staff experiences flu like symptoms (see above) they are asked to follow Public Health advice and stay at home, notify their manager by telephone, and contact their GP by telephone for advice. Alternatively you can contact NHS24 (08454 242424) for advice.

Important: If your health is already compromised by an existing chronic medical condition, your immune system is in some way already compromised, you are aged 65 or over, or you are pregnant, you should contact your doctor immediately.

Public Health advice is that you should not initially request a home visit from your GP, or attend a GP's surgery, but rather seek advice by telephone from either your GP or NHS24. Where this results in a diagnosis that confirms that the staff member has, in all probability, contracted the A(H1N1) (swine flu) strain then the member of staff is asked to voluntarily exclude themselves from the workplace until they are fit to return.

Any member of staff who has been in close contact with a probable or confirmed case of swine flu, but does not have flu-like symptoms are asked to follow Public Health advice and continue to attend work as normal.

Guidance on sickness absence can be accessed at: [HR Guidance for staff relating to swine flu](#)

If you are a manager, in order to minimise the spread of infection within the University you should:

- tell your staff to stay at home if they exhibit flu-like symptoms and seek advice as laid out above
- send home any staff member that exhibits flu-like symptoms at work and tell them to seek advice as above.

## **Business Travel**

Staff/students who are considering travel abroad for business / research / study reasons must undertake the University's Overseas Travel Risk Assessment and should read the Safety and Health Whilst Travelling on University Business guidance document allied to this risk assessment, both available at <http://www.ed.ac.uk/schools-departments/health-safety/guidance/transport-travel>

Most importantly anyone intending to travel abroad must take cognisance of, and comply with any travel restrictions detailed on the Foreign and

Commonwealth Office (FCO) website, which can be accessed via a link from the above guidance document.