

HOME CARE FOR THOSE WITH INFLUENZA-LIKE ILLNESS



For community health workers and family members

What is it?

Flu (seasonal or pandemic) is a respiratory illness. It is spread from person to person by contact with infected respiratory secretions infected with the flu virus.

How can I catch it?

Flu viruses are spread from person to person mainly through coughing or sneezing of persons with influenza.

Sometimes people may be infected by touching something with flu viruses on it and then touching their eyes, mouth or nose.

What can help prevent catching it?

First and most important—Wash your hands before and after touching eyes, nose or mouth.

Stay in good health by getting plenty of sleep, eating nutritious food and drinking plenty of non-sugar and low sugar fluids.

Avoid close contact with persons who are sick.

Do I have it?

The symptoms of swine flu in people are the same as the symptoms of seasonal or normal flu.

- Flu usually starts typically with a sudden onset of fever ($>38^{\circ}\text{C}$), tiredness, cough, sore throat, runny nose, aches and pains all over the body and sometimes also diarrhoea or vomiting.

The illness and infectiousness usually lasts about 5 to 7 days and a few days longer in children. A person can spread the virus, a day or so before becoming noticeably ill.

What is the difference between “seasonal” and “pandemic” flu

- Both seasonal (“ordinary”) and pandemic, can be deadly. Every year many thousands of people die from a flu related illness*.

- Flu viruses are constantly changing their shape by which our immune systems recognize them.
- Every winter a few “newish” seasonal flu viruses tend to dominate the scene, causing flu as we know it.
- Because this change is not that dramatic our immune systems recognizes them and respond quickly.
- However every 10 – 50 years a dramatic change in virus makeup takes place and it takes a while for the immune system to recognize and respond.
- If the pandemic virus is a mild one, the vast majority of people will become ill and recover and unless we do a sophisticated expensive test, no one will know the difference.
- However with pandemic flu it's not just people who are frail and elderly or those who have a chronic disease who tend to die, but also the young and healthy. Fortunately at this stage the death rate is very low (less than 0.5%). Influenza pandemics sometimes have a second wave which is worse than the first.

*Annual Global estimates: 250 000 to 500 000; in South Africa at least 10 000 people die prematurely as a result of flu. Note that seasonal flu vaccine provides only 40-70% protection, but if used *regularly* will significantly decrease the risk of dying in those at risk (ask your doctor or go to www.doh.gov.za for the list of risk groups) Flu vaccine's primary goal is to reduce risk not to completely prevent flu.

What if I get sick?

- Stay home and avoid exposing other others.
- Contact your doctor for instructions if you are not improving with rest, fluids and medicines for fever and body aches.
- Let your medical provider know if you have been to locations that are reporting swine flu or you have been in contact with someone who is sick and has traveled to locations reporting “swine flu”.

How serious is it?

Like seasonal flu, it can be mild to severe.

Serious symptoms in children that need urgent medical attention include:

- Fast breathing and / difficulty breathing
- Fever that is not reduced with “over the counter” medicines
- Inability to drink enough fluids (thirsty, weak, dry mouth, sunken eyes, passing small amounts of dark urine)

Serious symptoms in adults needing urgent medical attention include:

- Difficulty breathing
- Shortness of breath
- Confusion and dizziness
- Dehydration, as a result of vomiting or diarrhoea or weakness and inability to drink enough fluids.

Should I be worried?

Flu whether seasonal or pandemic is very infectious and difficult to avoid. You can only reduce the risk by:

- Catching your cough or sneeze, and encourage others to do the same.
- Cover your mouth and nose with your hand if someone else is coughing near you (<2m)
- Wash your hands or use alcohol rub after coughing, and before and after touching your eyes, nose and mouth.
- Encouraging those who are ill with flu symptoms to stay home until better.
- Employers and employees should discuss sick leave procedures upfront.

What about medicines and vaccines?

- There are specific medicines, such as oseltamivir, but these are only recommended for those at high risk of complications.
- A pandemic flu vaccine is being developed but will only become available towards the end of 2009, and supplies will be limited.

Schools and work places

- Those in charge should promote the coughing and hand washing messages vigorously, and encourage school children and employees to take the messages home to families and friends.
- Closing of places or work or schools to increase social distancing is controversial, as to be effective it needs to be implemented four weeks or more and even then a second wave of flu might wipe out the protection gained.*

*Cauchemez S, et al Estimating the impact of school closure on influenza transmission from sentinel data. Nature Vol 452, 10 April 2008

Basic Prevention Measures

1. Catch your cough / sneeze

- into a tissue and dispose of tissue in dustbin (best way!)
- into the inside of your elbow
- If you use your hands be sure to wash them
- Into the blanket or cover you are lying under

2. Wash your hands after coughing /sneezing

- thoroughly with soap & water after coughing or sneezing, if up and about.
If in bed: if available use tissues, which can be collected in a container and put straight into the rubbish bin.
- If alcohol hand rub is available, place it by the bed and rub on after coughing or after making contact with the patient.

3. Stay at home if you have flu-like illness until you feel better and have stopped coughing.

Home Care for the sick

- If possible, people with flu should be nursed in separate rooms.
- If possible - do not share a bed with children.
- If the above is not feasible, coughing patients should sleep with their heads nearer the feet, than the heads of others in the room
- Do not sit on the patient's bed.

Carers should:

- when not helping the patient directly, but talking or listening, keep an arm's length from patient
- wash their hands or use alcohol hand rub each time after touching the patient or clothes or bedding .
- Wear a mask if available.
- Use a plastic apron - when available. After use, wipe down with alcohol, carefully remove the apron with the outer surface facing the wall or door and hang it up with the outside surface facing the wall or door.