

Swine Flu Questions and Answers

Cystic Fibrosis Trust in collaboration with the clinical advisers to the Department of Health Pandemic Influenza Preparedness Programme

What is swine flu?

The pandemic influenza virus currently spreading among people is now generally referred to as swine flu, because it has some features in common with swine flu viruses. However the origin of the disease is still under investigation, and there is no evidence that this strain of flu virus has infected pig herds.

In common with swine influenza, this virus variant is of the H1N1 subtype, and is therefore called H1N1v.¹

Who is at risk from swine flu and are people with CF likely to be affected?

Severe cases of swine flu have occurred in people with underlying chronic conditions, including asthma, cardiovascular disease, diabetes, autoimmune disorders and obesity.

Pregnant women have an increased risk of complications from swine flu.

Very young, very old and frail people are more likely to develop complications from swine flu¹, but at present swine flu seems to be affecting more younger people.

People who are taking immunosuppressant medicines have a greater risk of becoming infected with any virus, including swine flu, and will be less able to fight it off should they be infected. They should seek advice from their medical team.

Department of Health guidance, and the planned response to the H1N1v pandemic, recognises chronic lung disease and specifically mentions Cystic Fibrosis as a condition, which places a patient at high risk of severe influenza and its complications.

There is no evidence that infants, children or adults with CF are more susceptible to viral infections than healthy people, but the impact could be greater and the outcome worse as the lower respiratory tract is affected more often. Respiratory viral infections are also associated with the onset of secondary bacterial infections, and the first isolation of a particular organism (particularly *Pseudomonas aeruginosa*) often follows a viral infection.²

What can I do to avoid it?

What precautions can I take to make it less likely to catch swine flu?

You can reduce, but not eliminate, the risk of catching or spreading swine flu by:

- Always covering your nose and mouth with a disposable tissue when coughing or sneezing.
- Disposing of dirty tissues promptly and carefully.

- Then washing hands with soap and warm water to reduce the spread of the virus from your hands to face, or to other people.
- Using antibacterial hand gel regularly when out and about, particularly on public transport.
- This message is being spread by the “Catch it, Bin it, Kill it” campaign (http://www.dh.gov.uk/en/Publicationsandstatistics/Publications/PublicationsPolicyAndGuidance/DH_080839).
- Cleaning hard surfaces, such as door handles, frequently using a normal cleaning product.

Should a person with Cystic Fibrosis avoid public areas such as public transport and swimming pools?

It is not possible to avoid all contact with the virus in the community. Individuals may benefit from reduced exposure by not attending public events where there is close contact with many people and avoiding public transport where possible but this would be a personal choice. Good respiratory hand hygiene is thought to be more important than avoiding public places.

Should I wear a facemask?

There's no conclusive evidence that facemasks will protect healthy people in their day-to-day lives.

The virus is spread to the hands by touching infected surfaces, or by respiratory droplet exposure when someone coughs or sneezes at very close range. So unless you are standing close to someone with the virus, wearing a facemask will not make a difference.

There are concerns about the risks posed by not using facemasks correctly.

Facemasks must be changed regularly as they are less effective when dampened by a person's breath. People may infect themselves if they touch the outer surface of their mask, or may infect others by not disposing of old masks safely.

Finally, wearing a facemask may encourage complacency. People need to focus on good respiratory hand hygiene and staying at home if they are feeling unwell.¹

What are the symptoms of swine flu and what should I do if I think I have flu?

The symptoms of swine flu in people are similar to the symptoms of regular human seasonal flu and include high fever (over 38C or 100.4F), cough, sore throat, muscle ache, fatigue, and lack of appetite. Some people with swine flu have reported nausea, vomiting and diarrhoea.

If you have flu-like symptoms and are concerned because you think you have been in contact with someone who may have swine flu:

- Stay at home.

- Check your symptoms if possible by visiting NHS Choices: <http://www.nhs.uk>
- Call the Swine Flu Information Line on 0800 1513 513 to hear the latest advice. Bear in mind that these lines may be busy in times of a pandemic so be patient and keep on trying.
- Call your GP. You will then be able to confirm whether your symptoms suggest that you have flu, and be provided with authorisation to collect an antiviral medicine. Although the government has set up the National Pandemic Fluline Service, people with an underlying condition such as Cystic Fibrosis are advised to call their GP instead. You must also contact your CF team for specific advice.
- Do not go into your CF Centre, GP surgery, or to a hospital, unless directed by your health adviser as you may spread the disease to others.
- Ask your flu friend to go out for you.
- It may be worth visiting your CF Centre's website to see if they have any advice.

To reiterate: If you or your child with CF are unwell with swine flu, it is very important that you also contact your CF Centre by telephone, as they may have advice specific to your or your child's Cystic Fibrosis.

What should I do if someone else (my partner/housemate/relative) catches swine flu before me, should I take antivirals straight away or wait for symptoms?

Individuals at high risk of severe or complicate flu, who have been in close household contact* with a case of swine flu can be offered antiviral medicines as a precautionary measure. Contact your GP, who will offer appropriate advice.

**Close contact is defined as being exposed to a probable or confirmed case within the previous seven days for longer than an hour, and within a distance of one metre.*

Antiviral medicine will be made available through Antiviral Collection Points in the community. Hospitals and CF teams cannot provide antiviral medicine apart from to inpatients.

Antiviral medicine (usually Tamiflu capsules) should be taken as soon as possible (ideally within 48 hours) when a patient has Flu symptoms. There is an oral Tamiflu solution for babies. For those who are pregnant or who have renal problems, Relenza should be used rather than Tamiflu.

Where a person with Cystic Fibrosis has new or increased respiratory symptoms, they normally start their "back-up" antibiotics. This advice has not changed. Any patient with Cystic Fibrosis who thinks they have Flu should also start their back-up antibiotics without delay.

What should I be doing to prepare now?

Confirm a network of 'flu friends' – friends and relatives – who could help you if you fall ill. They could collect medicines and other supplies for you so you do not have to leave home and possibly spread the virus. When your flu friend collects the antivirals, they will be required to show their own ID as well as that of the patient. The authorisation number and ID information will be checked to ensure it matches the information provided when the assessment of symptoms was completed. The ID includes: a utility bill, passport, a credit or debit card, driving licence, or NHS card.

Ensure that you know exactly what medication you or your child is currently taking as part of routine CF care. In cases of flu, secondary infections such as pneumonia are a common cause of severe illness and some deaths. The Department of Health has obtained an extra stockpile of antibiotics to help fight this and by **knowing your current medication**; you will help health care professionals to give you the correct treatment if needed.

Know your NHS number and those of other family members and keep them in a safe place. It is not essential to have your NHS number in order to receive treatment, but it can help NHS staff to find your health records. You will be able to find your NHS Number on your medical card or other items such as prescription forms, GP letters or hospital appointment cards/letters.

Make sure you have adequate quantities of cold and cough remedies in your medicine cupboard in case you or your family are affected by swine flu.¹

You should not be tempted to buy supplies of antiviral medicines. You cannot be sure of the quality of medicines that are purchased over the internet. The Department of Health has stockpiles of antiviral medicines at local collection points.

Is Vick's First Defence useful against swine flu?

Generally, people are free to use whatever over the counter medicines they feel will help their symptoms. People with Cystic Fibrosis should always take the advice of a pharmacist before taking an over the counter medicine for the first time.

Will my current flu jab cover swine flu?

Scientific evidence suggests that the seasonal flu jab does not provide protection against the current strain of swine flu. However, **it is very important that people with CF have the seasonal flu vaccine as soon as it becomes available**, as seasonal flu may still be circulating this winter.

When will a swine flu vaccine be available and will people with CF have priority?

Scientists have developed a new vaccine for swine flu, but it could take some time to manufacture enough supplies to meet what could be huge demand. The UK has agreements with manufacturers who will produce a vaccine when it becomes available. This is now estimated to be in December (54.6 million doses of the vaccine).

For people in high risk groups (which includes people with Cystic Fibrosis) the vaccination programme is estimated to begin in October. It is important that people with Cystic Fibrosis have both the seasonal flu vaccine and the vaccine being developed for Swine Flu when it is available.

The vaccine is a two stage vaccination process unlike the seasonal flu vaccine, which is normally given in only one dose.

Will the vaccine still provide people with protection if the swine flu virus mutates?

At this stage, it is impossible to predict if or how the H1N1 swine flu virus will mutate (change). However, experiences with the H5N1 vaccine (bird flu vaccine) would suggest that an H1N1 vaccine (produced using the same processes) would also provide a high level of immunity against closely related strains. The level of cross-protection is expected to be greatest for more closely related strains.

What will happen in a rapidly escalating flu pandemic?

A pandemic with rapidly increasing numbers of cases will have a knock on effect on the staffing of the NHS and other public services, as people may have to take time off for childcare and healthcare workers themselves are likely to be affected by the illness.

It is possible that respiratory consultants (including CF consultants) may be required to work on the flu emergency cases rather than their routine workload.

If this is the case, then the normal service at a CF Centre or clinic will be disrupted. It may be that people with CF are told not to come in as inpatients (unless an emergency) as there will only be a skeleton staff and the wards may be used to house infectious people with flu, which would not be an appropriate place for someone with Cystic Fibrosis to be anyway.

What would this mean for my CF care?

How will my care be affected and how will I access my CF care both as an inpatient and outpatient?

Each CF team should be making arrangements to support CF outpatients in the community. This could be by holding telephone clinics rather than regular clinics and providing a telephone answering machine-call back service.

How do I contact my CF team in an emergency?

One person's emergency is another person's urgent need to see a member of the team. An emergency is when a life or limb is in danger of being lost. If you have an emergency you should call for an ambulance. If you feel you need to see a doctor urgently, that is within a matter of hours, it is probably best to call your GP, who may see you or urgently refer you to the hospital CF team. Remember that doctors and ambulances will be very busy during the pandemic and will be strict in prioritising their services.

How will I be able to get my/my child's portacath flushed?

This will still need to be arranged with your CF team. The team should be making arrangements for portacath care. In busy pandemic times, or if your hospital is being used for serious infections, the portacath may need to be flushed by a different health care professional possibly at a different place to your CF centre. It is worth remembering that many people with different conditions have ports and many health professionals will have experience in flushing them, so although it may not be your usual service, arrangements should be made in your area for port flushing.

Some people can perform this task themselves. Your CF team will advise if this is appropriate for you or your child's treatment.

Will home oxygen and overnight liquid feed supplies/deliveries be affected during a flu outbreak?

The suppliers of home oxygen and liquid feeds have business contingency plans to continue these services.

Should I contact my CF team to ask for advice on swine flu or issues relating to it and CF care?

Your CF Team may have contacted you to tell you what to do about swine flu. You should follow their instructions as a first step. Other places to look if they have not are the CF Trust website, the website addresses and phonenumber at the end of this document, your GP and the National Pandemic Fluline Service.

What about transplantation? Will this still go ahead?

Transplantation arrangements may have to be reviewed if the pandemic becomes more severe. Each transplant centre may make its own arrangements. We are keeping abreast of the situation and will update this document as appropriate.

Information about antivirals

How do I get access to Tamiflu or Relenza (anti-virals)?

People with CF should access care through their GP. Although the government set up the National Pandemic Fluline in England, people with underlying health conditions such as CF should access treatment through their GP.

In most cases, a 'flu friend' should be asked to collect them from a specified location.¹

As stated before, you should also contact your CF Centre as they may have advice specific to you or your child's Cystic Fibrosis.

Will the access for people with CF also be via the GP or will it be via their CF team?

People with CF should receive access via the GP. Please telephone your CF team for other specialist advice. Please access all other general medical services (eg repeat prescriptions) via your GP.

Will other medication be necessary if I/my child contracts 'swine flu' to deal with my/my child's CF?

If you or your child appears to have caught swine flu, start the 'back-up' antibiotics and access antiviral medicine through the routes detailed above.

Is it safe to take the antivirals and do they do any good?

Current government advice is that although the antivirals can have recognised side effects, it is important for people with an underlying health condition should take them as directed. They reduce the symptoms of swine flu and can shorten the effects. They may help to prevent secondary infections and they can help to reduce the transmissibility. In all cases, seek the medical advice of your CF team, especially in regard to antibiotics and secondary infections.

Where can I find information about swine flu?

Swine Flu Information: 0800 1513 513

England

National Pandemic Fluline Service (England only, 8am to Midnight)

0800 1513 100 or 0800 1513 200 (textphone), or online at www.direct.gov.uk/pandemicflu

NB. People with CF should seek advice from the GP and CF Centre or clinic.

www.nhs.uk

www.direct.gov.uk/swineflu

Scotland

www.nhs24.com

Wales

www.nhsdirect.wales.nhs.uk

www.wales.gov.uk/health

Northern Ireland

www.dhsspsni.gov.uk

www.nidirect.gov.uk

Information concerning travel, schools and colleges, and the workplace will be published on

www.direct.gov.uk

Is there anybody at the CF Trust who can provide telephone/email advice with regard to care for me/my child during the swine flu pandemic?

The Cystic Fibrosis Trust will remain operating. Our helpline service will be expanded, but we cannot give out specific medical advice. You must contact your CF team for this.

In common with the general population, it is likely that many people with Cystic Fibrosis will contract swine flu. With good preparation and treatment, it is likely that people with CF will do well and recover from this, but as some are already very ill, they may experience worsening health.

References

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Much of this information comes from the Department of Health website and flu guidelines. These are constantly updated and we recommend that you visit them regularly if you have any concerns.

The CF Trust is in contact with the Department of Health regarding this flu pandemic. This information has been drawn up in conjunction with the clinical advisers to the Department of Health Pandemic Influenza Preparedness Programme

This information is not intended to replace or give specific medical advice. We recommend that you contact your CF Team for the most up to date information on swine flu and the possible effects on people with Cystic Fibrosis.

1. Department of Health Flu Guidelines
www.nhs.uk/conditions/pandemic-flu/pages/qa.aspx
2. Cystic Fibrosis. Third Edition. Hodson, Geddes, Bush
3. NHS Direct Website
<http://www.nhsdirect.nhs.uk>