

Dealing with the new flu

Influenza A, H1N1, swine flu

If flu strikes your household, there are some practical steps you can take to look after a patient and to keep your household as free as possible from germs.

How to recognize swine flu

Signs and symptoms of the new flu are similar to the symptoms of seasonal flu and can include:

- fever (a temperature of, or over, 38 °C)
- cough
- sore throat
- runny or stuffy nose
- body aches
- headache
- chills
- fatigue
- sometimes diarrhoea and vomiting.

Looking after babies and children

Care for a baby or child with the flu, in a separate, well aired room away from other members of the household.

If they have a temperature, give paracetamol in the dose recommended on the package, or ibuprofen (Nurofen) every four to six hours, unless your doctor says otherwise. Do not give medication containing aspirin to children under 14. Offer them cool fluids frequently, including water, fruit juice and milk.

Dress the child in lightweight clothing, and you can give lukewarm baths or showers. Don't give cold baths or showers, which can be unpleasant and distressing for a child, and does not lower body temperature. Use salt-water (saline) drops to treat a stuffy nose – these are available from your chemist. Sick children should be kept at home until they have recovered, unless you need to take them to the doctor.

When to call for help for your child

You should urgently seek medical or nursing attention when a baby or child has any of the following symptoms:

Breathing is fast or noisy, possibly with wheezing or grunting

Is working hard to breath – you can recognize this when the area below the ribs sucks inward (instead of expanding as normal) as baby breathes in

Lips or skin are purple or bluish, particularly the fingers and toes

Is limp (floppy) or unable to move

Is drowsy or difficult to wake

Is severely irritable, not wanting to be held

Has a seizure (convulsion/fit)

Is not drinking enough fluids, for instance nappies remain dry or there are fewer than four wet nappies in 24 hours

The child has been improving but then suddenly becomes worse.

If you are pregnant

If you are pregnant you are at greater risk of complications from the swine flu, and need to be particularly watchful for signs and symptoms of the virus. This is because your immune system (how you protect yourself from infection) is different while a new baby is growing inside you. Your baby inside may also be at increased risk, due your response to infection, such as a high temperature.

Practical steps you can take to reduce your chances of exposure to influenza include:

- washing and drying hands frequently (wash hands with soapy water for 15 seconds and dry with paper towel, or if you cannot do this, use a 65%-70% alcohol gel to clean your hands)
- staying away from people who are sick
- avoiding crowded places.

If you have influenza symptoms you should call your GP or Healthline for advice and remember:

- Both seasonal influenza and swine flu may make other medical problems worse
- Don't take any antiviral medication without consulting your doctor
- Treat any fever right away with paracetamol
- Drink plenty of fluids.

Breastfeeding

Don't stop breastfeeding if you are ill, because breast milk protects babies by passing on antibodies, which help fight off infection. Limit formula feeds if you can. If you are too sick to breastfeed, express milk and have someone give it to your baby.

Your doctor will decide if you need antiviral drugs such as Tamiflu or Relenza. These medicines work best when started soon after symptoms begin (within two days), but they may also be given to very sick or high risk people (including pregnant women) even after 48 hours. While there is little information about the effect of antiviral drugs in pregnant women or their babies, no serious side effects have been reported.

Looking after adults

If you have or develop an influenza-like illness you should stay home until you are well, and be sure to let a relative or friend know you are home. Rest in a room that is well aired and away from other members of the household. Here are steps you can take or help others take, to recover:

- Be sure to drink enough water or other cold drinks
- Take drugs that relieve pain and fever, such as paracetamol or ibuprofen
- Gargle with a glass of warm water and/or suck on sugarless hard sweets or lozenges for sore throats
- Use saline drops, nasal spray or decongestants for soothing and clearing your nose
- Clean your teeth regularly and keep your mouth clean and moist
- Cover coughs and sneezes with a tissue and dispose of them immediately in a sealed plastic bag, then the rubbish
- Keep your bedding and nightwear clean and dry, shower or bath regularly, or use a cloth to wash with warm water and soap
- Wash your hands often with soap and water or antiseptic rubs, and dry them well afterwards
- If you don't feel like eating solid food, try light fluid-type nutritional snacks such as chicken soup, yoghurt, an ice block or jelly.

Sick people should stay home and away from others until they recover, unless they need to go to the doctor.

If you are the caregiver

Be sure to take care to protect your own health, as you have an increased risk of becoming infected. Make sure you get enough rest, eat and drink regularly. Regularly wash your hands with soap and water and dry them well, or use an alcohol-based hand rub, including after you touch a sick person or handle their used tissues or laundry. Do not sleep in the same room as a sick person and spend the least amount of time possible in close contact with them.

When to call for help

Seek medical advice if you, or the person you are caring for starts to feel better, then gets worse, or has:

- A persistent temperature of 38 degrees or more
- Difficulty breathing, chest pain or shortness of breath
- Coughing up bloody or green phlegm
- Purple or blue skin around the lips and on fingertips or toes
- Severe ear pain
- Severe vomiting and unable to keep liquids down
- Slow to respond, is unusually quiet, or becomes confused
- Shows signs of dehydration, such as dizziness when standing, absence of urination
- Seizures or convulsions.

Anyone who has other significant underlying health problems should also seek medical advice if they develop flu symptoms.

Prevent flu spreading in your household

It's important to keep anyone in your household with the flu away from the rest of the family, in a separate room with the door closed. If possible, they should use a separate bathroom which should be cleaned daily with household disinfectant.

Sick people should stay home, unless they must go out for medical care, which will lessen the chance of spreading the virus to others. They should not have visitors other than caregivers, and if possible, only one person should take care of them. Don't share anything that may spread the flu.

Everyone in the household should frequently wash their hands with soap and water and dry them well, or use an alcohol-based hand rub. Use paper towels for drying hands after hand washing, or dedicate cloth towels to each person in the household.