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Flu pandemic: everything you need to know

September 2009



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Flu – this is what you need to know

Flu or influenza is an acute infectious disease caused by flu viruses. These viruses are transmitted either directly via droplets spread by an infected person sneezing, coughing and talking, or indirectly through contact with surfaces (e.g. hands, door handles) where viruses can survive for some time.

This year, Switzerland will be affected by two types of viruses:

Seasonal flu

Seasonal flu (seasonal influenza) is an acute illness of the breathing passages that occurs in the northern hemisphere between December and March each year like an epidemic.

Pandemic flu (H1N1)

Pandemics are (viral) diseases that spread throughout the whole world. The current pandemic flu (H1N1), also called swine flu, is caused by a novel flu virus that is transmitted particularly easily from person to person. In contrast to this, the assumption that the virus is transferred by consuming pork is wrong.

How does the flu affect people?

The symptoms are practically identical for both types of flu. However, four to five times more people fall ill with the pandemic flu because humans have no immunity to the novel flu virus. In addition, the illness can take a more serious course with some people, especially those suffering from underlying health problems. Everyone should therefore contribute to stemming the spread of the disease. This will reduce the number of people who catch the flu and protect particularly susceptible persons. In addition, a high number of illnesses occurring over a space of just a few weeks can overload the healthcare system, and a large number of absences can affect the activities of public services and companies.

We will show you on the following pages how you can protect yourself from the flu and what measures you must take if you are experiencing flu symptoms.

Important for everyone.

Hygiene and protective measures

You can contribute to protecting yourself and others by taking a simple set of measures.



Wash your hands

Wash your hands thoroughly several times a day with soap and water. It is important that you do so correctly:

- Wet your hands under running water.
- Lather your hands with soap, if possible liquid soap.
- Rub your hands until the soap starts foaming. As you do so, do not only clean the inner surfaces but also the backs of your hands, between the fingers, under the finger nails, and the wrists.
- Rinse your hands well under running water.
- Dry your hands with a clean towel, if possible with a disposable paper tissue, a cloth tissue roll, or air-dry them.

If there is no soap and water, or if they are difficult to obtain, a hand disinfectant may be used.



Cough or sneeze into a tissue

Hold a tissue in front of your mouth and nose when you cough or sneeze.



Dispose of tissue

Dispose of the tissue in a bin after use and then wash your hands thoroughly with water and soap.



Cough or sneeze into the crook of your arm

If you don't have a tissue on you, please cough or sneeze into the crook of your arm. This is more hygienic than holding your hand in front of your mouth. If you do use your hands nonetheless, wash them thoroughly with water and soap shortly after if possible.



Hygiene masks

Wearing a hygiene mask is particularly important for sick persons (see chapter "Important for anyone with flu symptoms"). Additional situations where wearing a hygiene mask is recommended by the authorities could arise in the course of the pandemic. Therefore please visit our website www.pandemia.ch periodically.

Important for all persons with flu symptoms

As soon as you start experiencing flu symptoms, it is vital that you observe the following measures to protect yourself and others.



Watch out for signs that could indicate flu

This involves the following symptoms:

- Sudden high temperature over 38°C.
- Shivering, headache, aching muscles and limbs.
- A runny nose, dry cough and sore throat.
- Dizziness or difficulty breathing.
- Stomach ache, diarrhoea or vomiting.



Stay at home

If you experience several flu symptoms, stay at home to prevent spreading the disease. Treat your flu completely at home. Wait at least one additional day after your fever has subsided completely before returning to your daily routine.



When must I contact a doctor?

Special flu treatment is normally not necessary. In most people, the flu runs its course without difficulties. But you should contact your physician by phone if you or your children exhibit severe flu symptoms (pain while breathing, difficulty breathing). Persons with elevated risk of complications should contact a doctor promptly in any event (see chapter “At-risk groups”).



No rash self-help

Do not visit a hospital emergency room directly and do not take antiviral medication (e.g. Tamiflu®) on your own initiative.



Wear a hygiene mask

Wear a hygiene mask if you have fallen ill and if you live with other people to prevent you from infecting your family members and flatmates. Those looking after a sick person at home should also wear a mask. The mask alone, however, does not offer complete protection. Therefore, masks should only be used in combination with other recommended hygiene measures.



If you have any contact with the outside world despite illness, please observe the following recommendations:

- Stay at least 1 metre away from other people if possible.
- Avoid shaking hands when greeting them.
- Avoid hugging and kissing when greeting them.
- Stay away from large groups of people.
- Wear a hygiene mask when you leave home.

If possible, inform all persons with whom you were in close contacts during or one day before your illness (e.g. your life partner, persons living in the same household, or if you were tending to a sick person) and advise them to pay close attention to their own state of health.

At-risk groups

For most people, flu runs its course without complications. There are, however, groups that are more susceptible to infection and complications. Pandemic flu more frequently affects young adults and children and less frequently elderly people of 65 and over. The prerequisites for an increased risk of complications are essentially the same for pandemic flu as for seasonal flu; the complications from pandemic flu, however, can be more severe, especially for young adults. For this reason, persons with an increased risk of complications with pandemic flu (H1N1) should contact a doctor immediately if they experience flu symptoms.

The following persons have an increased risk of complications with pandemic flu (H1N1):

Pregnant women, infants, persons with chronic illnesses (in particular respiratory illnesses such as asthma, chronic obstructive pulmonary disease (COPD) or cystic fibrosis, chronic heart disease, congenital heart defects, metabolic diseases such as diabetes, kidney diseases, blood diseases), persons with congenital or acquired immunodeficiency and immunosuppressive therapy, persons over 65 years of age (though their risk of infection is lower).

The following persons have an increased risk of complications with seasonal flu:

Persons over 65 years of age, premature babies, infants, persons with chronic illnesses (in particular respiratory illnesses such as asthma, chronic obstructive pulmonary disease (COPD) or cystic fibrosis, chronic heart disease, congenital heart defects, metabolic diseases such as diabetes, kidney diseases, blood diseases) or a suppressed immune system.

Vaccination

The most efficient method of protecting yourself from flu is through vaccination. It prepares the immune system to recognize the virus in the event of infection and enables it to ward off an infection. For at-risk groups, the risk of illness and its associated complications can be reduced considerably. Vaccination is voluntary. It is recommended for persons with an increased risk of complications as well as those in close contact with them. Anyone else who would like to avoid contracting the flu can have themselves vaccinated as well.



Vaccination against seasonal flu

As in each year, vaccination against seasonal flu is also offered in 2009. This vaccination is recommended for all persons 65 years and over, persons with chronic illnesses, premature babies from 6 months of age for two winters after birth, and residents of retirement or nursing homes. In addition, vaccination is recommended for people who have regular contact with those that have an increased risk of complications – whether within the family, at the workplace or in your leisure time. For those with an increased risk of complications and for persons over 65 years of age, the vaccination is paid for by the health insurance.

Vaccination against pandemic flu (H1N1)

The complex and time-consuming production of a vaccine has started and it can be assumed that vaccination against the pandemic flu (H1N1) will be offered in the course of autumn. We will provide detailed information on this in due course. Please visit our website www.pandemia.ch regularly for more information.

Treatment

Antiviral medications

Currently two medications are considered effective against pandemic flu (H1N1): Tamiflu® and Relenza®. They can alleviate flu symptoms and shorten the duration of the illness. These medications are only available on prescription. Talk to your doctor about whether it is necessary for you to take one of these medications. For those with an increased risk of complications, treatment with Tamiflu® is paid for by the health insurance.

These medications do not protect you from catching the flu; they merely combat the symptoms. Healthy persons are therefore advised against taking them as a precaution. Misuse can even result in the viruses becoming resistant to the medications.

How are children treated?

Both medications are also available in suitable dosages for children and in the event of illness are prescribed exclusively by the authorized doctor. Further information for parents can be found at www.pandemia.ch

Pregnant women

If required, the doctor can prescribe the antiviral medications during pregnancy and nursing as well.

Additional information all about the flu and protective measures can be found at www.pandemia.ch or the hotline +41 (0)31 322 21 00.