



## Responding to the H1N1 “Swine” Flu Outbreak

Safety professionals may be asked to take a lead role in managing H1N1 or swine flu-related issues for their organizations. ASSE has compiled guidance from leading health organizations such as the Center for Disease Control and the World Health Organization on how to respond to issues related to the swine flu.

### Get the Facts

With all of the attention that swine flu has been getting in the media, your employees may have questions about what the swine flu is, what the symptoms are, and how it can be transmitted.

- **What is swine flu?** Swine influenza, or “swine flu”, is a highly contagious acute respiratory disease of pigs, caused by one of several swine influenza A viruses. Morbidity tends to be high and mortality low (1-4%). The virus is spread among pigs by aerosols, direct and indirect contact, and asymptomatic carrier pigs. Outbreaks in pigs occur year round, with an increased incidence in the fall and winter in temperate zones. Many countries routinely vaccinate swine populations against swine influenza.
- **What are the implications for human health?** Outbreaks and sporadic human infection with swine influenza have been occasionally reported. Generally clinical symptoms are similar to seasonal influenza but reported clinical presentation range broadly from asymptomatic infection to severe pneumonia resulting in death.
- **How does H1N1 flu spread?**  
Human-to-human transmission of H1N1 flu can occur in the same way as seasonal flu occurs in people, which is mainly person-to-person transmission through coughing or sneezing of people infected with the influenza virus. People may become infected by touching something with flu viruses on it and then touching their mouth or nose.
- **What are the symptoms of swine flu?** Symptoms of swine flu include fever, lethargy, lack of appetite and coughing. Some people with swine flu also have reported runny nose, sore throat, nausea, body aches, vomiting and diarrhea.
- **Is there a vaccine to protect humans from swine influenza?** There are no vaccines that contain the current swine influenza virus causing illness in humans. It is not known whether current human seasonal influenza vaccines can provide any protection. Influenza viruses change very quickly. It is important to develop a vaccine against the currently circulating virus strain for it to provide maximum protection to the vaccinated people.
- **How can human infections with swine influenza be diagnosed?** To diagnose swine influenza A infection, a respiratory specimen would generally need to be

collected within the first 4 to 5 days of illness (when an infected person is most likely to be shedding virus). However, some persons, especially children, may shed virus for 10 days or longer. Identification as a swine flu influenza A virus requires sending the specimen for laboratory testing.

- ***What treatments are there available for swine flu?*** The recommended anti-viral medications are the same as the treatments for regular influenza: Tamiflu and Relenza. Treatment will be more effective if it is started within 48-hours of the onset of the illness. If you or anyone within your organizations has flu symptoms, they should see their doctor immediately.

### **Communicate with Your Employees**

Depending on the level of alarm at your organization, you may consider an email, a face-to-face meeting, an article in a newsletter, and postings in the break areas and rest rooms. Your objective is to get control of the situation, calm your employees' fears, and avoid panic.

- ***What advice can I give my employees to help prevent a possible swine flu outbreak at my workplace?*** Regardless of whether a virus is going around, you should always encourage your employees to practice good health habits, get enough sleep, manage their stress, eat well, and drink lots of fluids in order to keep their immune systems strong. You should also instruct your employees to wash their hands with soap and water frequently and thoroughly, avoid touching their eyes, nose, or mouth, where germs can quickly spread, practice coughing and sneezing etiquette, and to stay at home if they feel ill. You could also give your employees access to hand sanitizer throughout the workday.
- ***What should I do if one of my employees displays symptoms?*** As is the case with any other flu virus, if one of your employees expresses that they are experiencing any flu-like symptoms, encourage them to stay at home. Advise the employee to keep you updated on the status of their condition.
- ***Should I wipe down surfaces at my workplace?*** Germs can live for two hours or longer on tables, doorknobs, desks, and other surfaces. You might consider doing this, particularly in common areas.
- ***If one of my employees has possibly been exposed to someone with flu symptoms, should I advise my employees to wear facemasks?*** A mask is a barrier that can protect your nose and mouth from droplets that fly in the air when someone coughs. But it will not protect the conjunctiva in your eyes, which is another entry point. Used alone, a facemask will not prevent you from getting the flu.
- ***When can I tell my employees that the danger from this flu virus has passed?*** You or your employees may have heard that the current H1N1 swine flu virus is not as dangerous as was initially feared. Right now, the virus does not have characteristics that have been found in past flu viruses with high morbidity and mortality rates. However, there is some concern that this virus could mutate over

the summer months and return in the fall as a more dangerous flu virus. While the immediate threat may be subdued, you should continue to encourage your employees to practice good health habits over the summer months so that they are better prepared to respond to a possible virus resurgence in the fall.

### **Responding to Concerns**

Given the widespread media coverage regarding swine flu, you should be prepared to answer questions from management and employees regarding the steps to take to protect both the company and its employees. You should rely on the advice of experts in making decisions for your organization. Stick to the facts, if you are unsure about what course-of-action to take, contact your local public health department.

- ***Should my organization restrict travel to countries or cities where swine flu outbreaks have occurred?*** Follow the travel guidelines of the [US State Department](#), [CDC](#), the [WHO](#), and your local public health department. Your company may have a stricter travel policy, so be sure to review your company's travel restriction guidelines .
- ***What steps should I take when an employee returns from traveling to an area where swine flu outbreaks have occurred?*** If any employees have recently traveled to an area where swine flu cases have been reported, remind them to be alert for symptoms. Inform them that if at any point they present flu symptoms, encourage them to stay at home. If they do not have flu symptoms but are concerned that they may have been exposed to the virus, you may want to offer those employees the option to telecommute.
- ***What should I do if employees are concerned about working around fellow employees that have recently traveled to areas where an outbreak was reported?*** At this time, the CDC has not recommended any medical evaluations for employees that have traveled to impacted areas, which means that there are no work restrictions for these employees. As is the case with any communicable illnesses, employees should contact their supervisors immediately if they exhibit symptoms.

### **Emergency Preparedness and Planning**

While there has been a considerable amount of discussion in the media about a possible "swine flu pandemic," the current outbreak is NOT considered to be a pandemic. However, you can use this situation as an opportunity to review and update your organization's plans for emergency preparedness.

- ***What should I say if employees ask whether the swine flu is a pandemic?*** Let your employees know that the swine flu is not a pandemic right now. To be classified as a global pandemic, the disease must have community level-outbreaks with prolonged human-to-human transmission in at least two countries on different continents. It is a disease outbreak, and they happen all the time - we just don't

always hear about it in the media. You can also let your employees know that your organization has a plan-of-action in place.

- ***Where can I find resources that will help me with pandemic preparation?***

#### ASSE Resources

- *Avian Flu Infection Control Guidelines*: by Aruna Vadgama, RN, MPA, CSP, CPHQ, CPE, COHN-S  
[http://www.asse.org/practicespecialties/articles/avian\\_flu.php](http://www.asse.org/practicespecialties/articles/avian_flu.php)
- *Fact Sheet: Advancing the Nation's Preparedness for Pandemic Influenza*  
[http://www.asse.org/practicespecialties/healthcare/pandemic\\_influenza.php](http://www.asse.org/practicespecialties/healthcare/pandemic_influenza.php)
- *Are you prepared for the threat of an influenza pandemic?*  
<http://www.asse.org/newsroom/safetytips/pandemic-flu.php>
- *Planning for Pandemic Surge Population(pdf)*: by Aruna Vadgama, RN, MPA, CSP, CPHQ, CPE, COHN-S
- *Business Readiness Plan(pdf)*: by Aruna Vadgama, RN, MPA, CSP, CPHQ, CPE, COHN-S
- *Reasons for Concern, Reasons for Preparedness(ppt)*, Scott Mungo – Managing Director, Corporate Safety Health and Fire Protection – FedEx Express

#### ASSE Educational Opportunities on Pandemic Preparation

ASSE will have several sessions at the 2009 PDC in San Antonio, Texas addressing pandemic preparation. These sessions include:

Session 506 (Monday, June 29, 10:45am): "Dodging the Bugs: Infection Control at Work," Speaker Deborah Fell-Carlson

Session 530 (Monday, June 29, 3:15pm): "Pandemic Influenza Epidemiology and Planning," Speaker Jay Brakensiek

Session 745 (Wednesday, July 1, 11:00am)"Pandemic Influenza: An Occupational Safety and Health Perspective," Speakers Gary Morris & Tanis Batsel

<http://www.asse.org/education/pdc09/>

#### External Resources

- OSHA, *Guidance on Workplaces for an Influenza Pandemic*  
<http://www.osha.gov/Publications/OSHA3327pandemic.pdf>
- OSHA, *Recordkeeping Guidance on Swine Flu (doc)*
- Public Safety, Canada, *A Guide to Business Continuity Planning*  
<http://www.publicsafety.gc.ca/prg/em/gds/bcp-en.asp>
- Centers for Disease Control & Prevention, *Stopping the Spread of Germs at Work*  
<http://www.cdc.gov/germstopper/work.htm>
- CDC, Webpage of free pandemic planning resources  
<http://www.cdc.gov/flu/Pandemic/>
- Mercer, the HR consulting giant, has a web page full of free planning tools

<http://www.mercer.com/avianflu>

- Pennsylvania Checklist, *Pandemic Planning for Business Owners and Employers Business Continuity Checklist*

<http://www.pandemicflu.state.pa.us/pandemicflu/lib/pandemicflu/factsheets/Pandemic Planning Business Continuity Checklist.pdf>

- World Health Organization, Pandemic influenza preparedness website

<http://www.who.int/csr/disease/influenza/pandemic/en/>

- National Institute of Health, *Environmental Health Links 2009 H1N1 Flu*

<http://sis.nlm.nih.gov/enviro/swineflu.html>

### **Swine Flu Updates**

[Center for Disease Control](#)

[World Health Organization](#)