

What to do about Swine Flu?

- WASH YOUR HANDS FREQUENTLY • USE A TISSUE WHEN YOU SNEEZE • STAY SIX FEET AWAY FROM ANYONE WHO IS SICK • WATCH FOR SYMPTOMS • IF YOU'RE SICK, STAY HOME • WATCH FOR PUBLIC-HEALTH ALERTS •

Approximately 2,300 cases of influenza A (H1N1) have been reported in more than 20 countries, and the World Health Organization has raised its alert level to Phase 5, meaning a pandemic is imminent.

Will the Mexican swine flu outbreak turn into a pandemic? And will it reach Southeast Kansas?

"It's still too early to know, as frustrating as that is," said Dr. Michael Farris, medical director of the Labette Health Emergency Department. "So far most of the cases in the United States have been mild and the expansion of the illness has been slow. It hasn't exploded yet, but that's still possible.

"The virus changes for a variety of reasons. It can mutate, which can change how lethal it is. The mutation within one person can happen very quickly. The likelihood of seeing the virus mutate partly depends on how much infection it's causing in the population. So if the infection rates are low, the mutation rate is lower," he said.

"They think they have identified Case Zero, as they're calling it, in the Mexican village of La Gloria. It was a five-year-old, who lived very near a sewage dump from a hog

farm. The current strain that's out there is about 80 percent swine, 10 percent human and 10 percent avian, or bird flu."

He noted that avian flu, which scientists have tracked for several years, causes a very severe infection with a high death rate. At this point, it usually can be caught only from infected birds, not passed from person to person.

If the WHO raises its alert to Phase 6, the highest level, that indicates only how easily the virus can spread, not how deadly it is. Only two swine flu-related deaths have been reported in the United States, and no other country besides Mexico has reported a death. Although as of May 7, Kansas has 12 confirmed cases and one probable, and Missouri has nine confirmed and four probable, no cases have been reported in the immediate four-state area, Dr. Farris said.

"What we're doing right now is actively surveying for any potential cases, so it's very important that if somebody thinks they had an exposure and thinks their symptoms match those of swine flu, they get checked out. We need to know if there's an exposure so we can take the steps necessary to limit the spread of the infection," he said.

"An infection of influenza

makes an individual very sick. It's not the kind of thing where you're going to have a little bit of a sneeze or a little bit of a cough and otherwise feel fine. If they have the flu, whether it's regular influenza or swine influenza, people are going to feel very ill. They're going to be running a fever and coughing a lot. Sometimes there's a sore throat that goes with it. Usually there are headaches and muscle aches. What swine flu adds



Dr. Michael Farris, medical director of the Labette Health Emergency Department, says it's too soon to tell whether a swine flu pandemic will become a serious health threat in Southeast Kansas.

to that are gastrointestinal symptoms like nausea or diarrhea."

Dr. Farris said that two medications, Tamiflu and Relenza, are effective against the swine flu virus, although this year's strain of regular flu, influenza A, was resistant to Tamiflu.

"That's just another example of how a mutation within the viruses' DNA can affect what medicines work, how severe it is, and how easily it's transmitted from person to person," Dr. Farris said. Both medications have to be started within the first 48 hours to have any effect.

Existing flu vaccines are not effective against the influenza A H1N1 strain. According to the WHO, work is already under way to develop a vaccine against this strain; however, developing a new vaccine can take five to six months.

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- Dr. Michael Farris

Asia, because typically the flu moves in an easterly direction starting in Asia in our late summer and hits the United States in mid- to late fall and wintertime. So each year they design the flu vaccine to fight the first flu viruses that come up.

"Last year the flu vaccine they designed actually ended up not covering one of the major flu viruses that went around, so a lot of people who got the flu vaccine still got an influenza infection," he said.

Dr. Farris said that the public could do its part to limit the spread of the influenza infection by taking a few simple
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Hoping for the best, preparing for the worst

As more swine flu cases are confirmed every day, local health officials say you shouldn't panic. Benjamin Cochran, R.N., isn't panicking either, but he's been spending a lot of time lately thinking about some very dire possibilities.

"In my job, I have to think about the worst-case scenarios," said Cochran, who is emergency preparedness coordinator at Labette Health. From Cochran's viewpoint, the worst case would look a lot like 1918, when an influenza outbreak killed millions worldwide and some 675,000 in the United States alone.

"The worst case would be a significant influenza outbreak in this area, where at that point we would be treating a mass event," he said. Even if such an outbreak occurred, the hospital should be able to handle the additional patients.

"This isn't like a 10-car pileup that would bring a sudden, massive influx of people through the door at one time," said Dr. Michael Farris, medical director of the Labette Health Emergency Department. "If it happens to come to this area, it would be a gradual spread through the population. We would be busy, but we believe we have the capability of handling that level of volume."

Cochran said that in the event of a serious outbreak, Labette Health would consider setting up a separate treatment area for swine flu patients.

"We're still going to have our regular patients. We're still going to have our trauma. We're still going to have our normal, day-to-day emergency-room activity, and we don't want those people exposed to this infection."

Because healthcare workers are also at risk, Cochran and Mary Hizey, R.N., infection control nurse at Labette Health, have been working with hospital staff to anticipate an outbreak.

"Under Centers for Disease Control guidelines for healthcare providers, any time we're within six feet of someone



Benjamin Cochran, R.N., emergency preparedness coordinator, conducts a fit-test on an N95 particle respirator mask worn by emergency nurse Becky Umbarger, R.N.

we suspect of having the swine influenza virus, we put on the N95 particle respirator mask. That's a mask that will stop particles above 95 microns in diameter, well below the size of the virus," Cochran said.

"As part of our active surveillance program, we've been pushing our employees to make sure they have obtained a fit-test of the mask. In the

the virus. They're on hand at all of our registration desks, and they do block contaminants."

Cochran said that a pandemic influenza task force that included Labette Health, the Labette County Health Department and other local agencies, was already in place and had studied what might happen in the event of a pandemic.

just to make sure everybody is on the same page. All the local agencies have shown a good understanding of the significance of this, and have been very willing to participate in preparations," he said.

Part of that cooperative effort involved contacting local companies whose employees may have traveled to Mexico recently.

"We know of people from this area who have traveled to Mexico recently. In this era of global travel, that's not uncommon. Unfortunately, one of the infection clusters in Mexico was Cancun, which is a popular vacation destination," Dr. Farris said.

The federal government has released 25 percent of its strategic stockpile of the antiviral drugs Tamiflu and Relenza, and the CDC has completed distribution to the states. The Kansas Department of Health and Environment has received Kansas' allocation and has distributed it to strategic undisclosed locations.

"We've had contact this week with local pharmacies in reference to how much Tamiflu and Relenza they have in stock, if they're seeing an increase in usage and whether they will be

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- Benjamin Cochran, R.N.

last three or four days, we've probably tested 80 to 100 of our staff members. And that includes explaining the precautions and when to use the mask." Normal surgical masks stop the spread of water droplets that may carry the virus, but they are ineffective against the virus itself, he said.

"As the CDC recommends, that's what we place on patients here if we suspect they may have

"In that task force, we met with funeral homes to discuss their capacities. We met with local nursing homes to discuss the fact that if it turns into a full-blown pandemic where we have the hospital at maximum capacity, their patients will need to be treated there instead of bringing them to the hospital. We met with local pharmacists and we also met with local law enforcement agencies,

Swine Flu Symptoms

According to the Centers for Disease Control, common swine flu symptoms include fever, headache, tiredness, cough, sore throat, runny or stuffy nose, body aches, diarrhea, and vomiting. Although the CDC expects that most people will recover without medical attention, those who are severely ill should contact their healthcare provider.

Warning signs that a child might need urgent medical attention include:

- Fast breathing or difficulty breathing
- Bluish or gray skin color
- Not drinking enough fluids
- Severe or persistent vomiting
- Not waking up or not interacting
- Being so irritable that the child does not want to be held
- Flu-like symptoms that improve but then return with fever and worse cough

In adults, warning signs that urgent medical attention is needed include:

- Difficulty breathing or shortness of breath
- Pain or pressure in the chest or abdomen
- Sudden dizziness
- Confusion
- Severe or persistent vomiting
- Flu-like symptoms that improve but then return with fever and worse cough

If you feel that you may have some swine flu symptoms, contact your healthcare provider. The Kansas Department of Health and Environment has established a hotline and e-mail address for issues related to the H1N1 swine flu. Kansans with questions or concerns can either call 877-427-7317 between 8 a.m. and 5 p.m. Monday thru Friday or send an email to swinefluinfo@kdheks.gov. •

I see photographs of people wearing surgical masks. Will those keep me from catching the swine influenza virus?

“Yes, and no,” said Dr. Michael Farris, Labette Health Emergency Department medical director. “Yes, they do good. They stop the spread of cough droplets, which is primarily how the influenza virus is spread. Should people be buying and wearing them? No, that’s not recommended, unless there’s a heavy outbreak in our area, and we’re not seeing that here.

“It’s far better protection to make a regular habit of washing your hands, especially if you’re in a public place around other people than it would be to wear a surgical mask.” Dr. Farris added that hand-sanitizing gels also are effective in stopping the spread of viruses.

Should I stay away from public places? Is it safe to fly?

“If they’re not sick, there’s no reason to avoid those places,” Dr. Farris said. “If they

Swine Flu FAQ

become sick, people should stay at home. Don’t go out in public, don’t go to school, don’t go to work, don’t go to the grocery store,” He said.

Can I get swine flu by eating pork?

No. Influenza viruses are not food-borne. The Kansas Department of Health and Environment’s website states, “You won’t get the H1N1 flu virus from eating pork products or other consumable products from Mexico or other affected areas.”

Can I catch it from being around pigs?

“You can catch swine

flu from an infected pig, but we’re not seeing swine influenza in pigs in this country, so that risk doesn’t exist at this point,” Dr. Farris said. “I think it’s clear that at some point, this particular strain crossed from swine to humans and that’s what unique about it.

“Swine flu is always there. There’s always a risk that you can pick up a swine influenza from an infected pig. Normally, what happens is that there is one person who caught it from a pig and that’s the end of it. The fact that this particular strain of a swine influenza can now be spread person-to-person is what makes this one unique and dangerous.”

Will the flu shot I had earlier protect me from swine influenza?

No, each flu vaccine is designed to protect against a specific strain of the influenza virus, and this year’s vaccine does not have any pieces that are specifically designed to protect against this particular strain. However, Dr. Farris said that the program of flu vaccinations in the United States may have provided at least some protection.

“Since the 1976 incident with swine influenza, the annual flu vaccine has contained an H1N1 piece to it. It’s different than this H1N1 piece, but one of the theories is that our vaccines have been similar enough to this one that that may be why the cases have been so mild,” he said.

How are swine flu cases confirmed?

“If a provider here feels that there is a suspected case, he will order a rapid influenza test in our lab,” said Benjamin Cochran, emer-

gency preparedness coordinator at Labette Health. “If the test comes back positive, the provider will discuss the case with the epidemiologist at the Kansas Department of Health and Environment. If the KDHE wants another sample, they will decide if it should be sent to the Centers for Disease Control.”

Who is most at risk?

“In a typical influenza season, we worry about those with the weakest immune systems, which are the younger and older members of the population, as well as those with other illnesses such as cancer and lung disease,” Dr. Farris said.

“This year, when the H1N1 influenza was in Mexico, it appeared to be targeting the 20- to 40-year-old age range, people who were healthy. What we’ve seen in this country doesn’t necessarily match that, so at this point, it’s a little bit difficult to know who’s going to be most at risk.” •

A history of pandemics: Influenza through the years

1889 – The “Russian Flu” was the earliest influenza pandemic for which detailed records are available. It originated in Russia, spread rapidly across Europe and reached America in late 1889, killing approximately 1 million people worldwide.

1918 – The influenza pandemic

of 1918-1919 ranks as the most devastating epidemic in recorded human history. Although influenza had reached epidemic levels in 1916, the symptoms were relatively mild and were largely ignored. In 1918, however, the mutated virus quickly spread across the globe, infecting a fifth of

the world’s population and claiming between 20 and 40 million lives – some estimates are as high as 100 million.

Although the influenza strain was called “Spanish Flu” because of the devastation it inflicted there, it did not originate in Spain. A first wave in the spring of 1918 swept through U.S. Army camps such as Camp Funston at Fort Riley, Kansas. The First World War helped the virus to spread throughout the world, and when American troops returned home, a second wave devastated the country, killing almost 200,000 in October of 1918 alone. In the United States, an estimated 675,000 died.

1957 – The “Asian Flu” was an avian or bird flu of the H2N2
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Preparing for the worst...

able to obtain more if it is needed,” Cochran said. “Under CDC and KDHE guidelines, we have to exhaust our entire local supply and have federal approval before we will be able to obtain any of the stockpiled antivirals.”

Both Cochran and Dr. Farris said that it was too early to tell how widespread or how serious the current swine influenza infections would be. Both said they were confident that local healthcare providers were prepared for any possibility – especially if their potential patients protect themselves by helping stop the spread of the infection.

“If the public will take reasonable precautions, we’ll have to deal with a lot less illness,” Cochran said. •



A few common-sense precautions can help stop the spread of swine influenza, according to the Centers for Disease Control

- Cover your mouth and nose when you cough or sneeze. Use a tissue instead of coughing into your hand or arm, and throw the tissue away immediately.
- Wash your hands frequently with soap and water, especially if you are coughing or sneezing. If you can’t wash your hands, use an alcohol-based hand-sanitizer.

- Avoid spreading germ by touching your eyes, nose or mouth.
- Try to avoid coming closer than six feet to anyone who is sick.
- If you are sick, stay home for at least seven days after the first symptoms, or until you have been symptom-free for 24 hours, whichever is longer. Avoid infecting other household members.
- Follow the advice of local public health officials regarding avoiding crowds and school closures. •

Influenza pandemics...

strain that began in early 1956 and lasted through 1958, infecting between 1 and 4 million people worldwide and killing approximately 70,000 in the United States. It started in China with a mutation in wild ducks that combined with a human strain. Although the infection spread widely through school children, death rates were highest among the elderly. An influenza vaccine was developed in 1957; however, a second wave appeared in early 1958.

1968 – The “Hong Kong Flu” contained genes from the 1957 Asian Flu, but the new type developed in pigs that

were infected with both avian and human viruses and then transferred to humans. An estimated 1 million people died as the virus spread worldwide. It entered California with troops returning from Vietnam. The U.S. death toll was approximately 34,000.

1976 – A swine influenza virus H1N1 sickened soldiers at Fort Dix, N.J. One soldier died. The U.S. Public Health Service immediately launched one of the largest immunization campaigns in history. However, the expected pandemic failed to occur, and the vaccinations may even have caused serious side effects. •

For more information:

Kansas Department of Health and Environment Swine Flu Hotline:

877-427-7317

KDHE website: **[www.kdheks](http://www.kdheks.com)**

Centers for Disease Control website: **www.cdc.gov/h1n1flu**

What to do about swine flu...

precautions, like coughing and sneezing into a tissue or washing their hands frequently.

“Most people actually catch respiratory illnesses because somebody’s coughed in their hand and their hand touches a common surface like a handrail. Then somebody else

comes along and touches that handrail and then touches their mouth or nose.”

For healthcare providers, the important question really isn’t whether the swine flu infection becomes a pandemic. The important question is whether they’re prepared for it if it does, said Benjamin Cochran, R.N., Labette Health emergency preparedness coordinator.

“Our response is like that of the fire department. When they get the call, they respond with lights and sirens every time, even if it turns out to be a controlled situation. The hospital’s situation is like that. We are responding very proactively – as we will every time – even if it turns out to be less of a threat than originally thought.” •



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