

Information for patients about swine flu and how it is treated

What is swine flu?

Influenza A/H1N1 (known as swine flu) is a new type of influenza (or flu) that has emerged because of changes to the swine influenza virus circulating in the US. The virus can infect humans and spreads easily from person to person and since it is a new virus, large numbers of the population will be susceptible. For these reasons and the way the virus has spread around the World, the World Health Organisation declared a pandemic.

What are the symptoms?

Symptoms of swine flu are similar to those of seasonal flu infection and include fever, fatigue, lack of appetite, coughing, sore throat, joint pain, headache and a runny nose. Some people with swine flu have also reported vomiting and diarrhoea.

How does swine flu move from person to person?

It is thought to spread in the same way as seasonal flu, through droplet transmission by coughing, sneezing or even talking to someone. Because of their size, these droplets do not remain in the air for long and do not travel more than a distance of one metre, so fairly close contact is required. The virus can be passed directly from person to person, through skin to skin or oral contact. It can also be passed by indirect contact, for example, from an infected person coughing or sneezing on to a piece of furniture or crockery and another person then transfers the organisms from there to their mouth, nose or eyes.

How is swine flu treated?

Swine flu is now circulating in Devon and nationally the decision has been made to move to a treatment-only approach. This means GPs are no longer routinely prescribing or recommending antiviral medicines for anyone other than the patient themselves.

There are two types of antivirals. One is called Tamiflu and is prescribed for most people, the other is Relenza, for people with certain conditions, usually pregnant women or people with kidney trouble.

Antivirals are not a 'cure' but can reduce the virus spreading in your body and can help you to recover more quickly. They also reduce the risk of complications and lessen the infectivity in people so that its spread may be delayed. They do not offer longer term protection. If you have been given antiviral medicine, you should complete the whole course of treatment. The leaflet with the medicine contains further information.

What can I do to help myself and others?

The best way to avoid transmission is to keep all surfaces clean and to follow the advice below:

CATCH IT: germs spread easily. Always carry tissues and use them to catch your cough or sneeze.

BIN IT: Germs can live for several hours on tissues. Dispose of them as soon as possible.

KILL IT: Hands can transfer germs to any surface you touch. Clean your hands as soon as you can.

Where should the antiviral medicines be collected?

If your GP says you have swine flu, you should not collect the antiviral medicine yourself. Your flu friend should do this for you. This is to reduce the risk of you spreading the virus to others.

A flu friend is a family member, friend or neighbour who can collect the prescription from one of a number of antiviral collection points set up across Devon. Your flu friend may also be able to do some shopping for you so that you do not need to leave home until you feel well again.

When the GP has given you a prescription for the antiviral medicine, they will tell you which collection point your flu friend will need to attend to pick it up. They will also tell you the opening times. If it is late in the day they may have to pick them up the following morning. There is no cost for this treatment.

Please note that your flu friend must identify themselves when collecting the medicine. A valid driving licence, passport or utility bill will suffice. If they cannot produce one of these it could delay your treatment.