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Q&As on Novel Influenza A (H1N1) **'Swine Flu'**

What is Novel Influenza A (H1N1)?*

H1N1 (previously referred to as "swine flu") is a new influenza virus causing illness in people. This new virus was first detected in people in the United States in April 2009. Other countries, including Mexico and Canada, have reported people sick with this new virus. This virus is spreading from person-to-person, probably in much the same way that regular seasonal influenza viruses spread.

Why is this Novel H1N1 influenza virus sometimes called 'swine flu'?*

This virus was initially referred to as "swine flu" because laboratory testing showed that many of the genes in this new virus were very similar to influenza viruses that normally occur in pigs in North America. But further study has shown that this new virus is very different from what normally circulates in North American pigs. It has two genes from influenza viruses that normally circulate in pigs in Europe and Asia and avian genes and human genes. Scientists call this a "quadruple reassortant" virus.

Is the Novel H1N1 influenza virus the same as human H1N1 influenza viruses?*

No. The Novel H1N1 influenza virus is antigenically very different from human H1N1 influenza viruses and, therefore, vaccines for human seasonal influenza would not provide protection from Novel H1N1 influenza viruses.

Is this Novel H1N1 influenza virus contagious?*

CDC has determined that this Novel H1N1 influenza virus is contagious and is spreading from human to human. However, at this time, it is not known how easily the virus spreads between people.

How does Novel H1N1 influenza spread?*

Spread of this Novel H1N1 influenza virus is thought to be happening in the same way that seasonal influenza spreads. Influenza viruses are spread mainly from person to person through coughing or sneezing of people with influenza. Sometimes people may become infected by touching something with influenza viruses on it and then touching their mouth or nose.

What is an influenza pandemic?*

An influenza pandemic occurs when a new influenza virus appears against which the human population has no immunity, resulting in epidemics worldwide. With the increase in global transport, as well as urbanization and overcrowded conditions, epidemics due to new influenza virus are likely to quickly take hold around the world.

Outbreaks of influenza in animals, especially when happening simultaneously with annual outbreaks of seasonal influenza in humans, increase the chances of a pandemic, through the merging of animal and human influenza viruses. During the last few years, the world has faced several threats with pandemic potential, making the occurrence of the next pandemic a matter of time.

* Information taken from CDC website (www.cdc.gov)

** Information taken from WHO website (www.who.int)

Q&As on Novel Influenza A (H1N1) – contd.

What are the consequences of an influenza pandemic?*

In the past, influenza pandemics have resulted in increased morbidity and mortality and great social disruption. In the 20th century, the most severe influenza pandemic occurred in 1918 -1919 and caused an estimated 40–50 million deaths world wide. Current epidemiological models project that a pandemic could result in 2 to 7.4 million deaths globally.

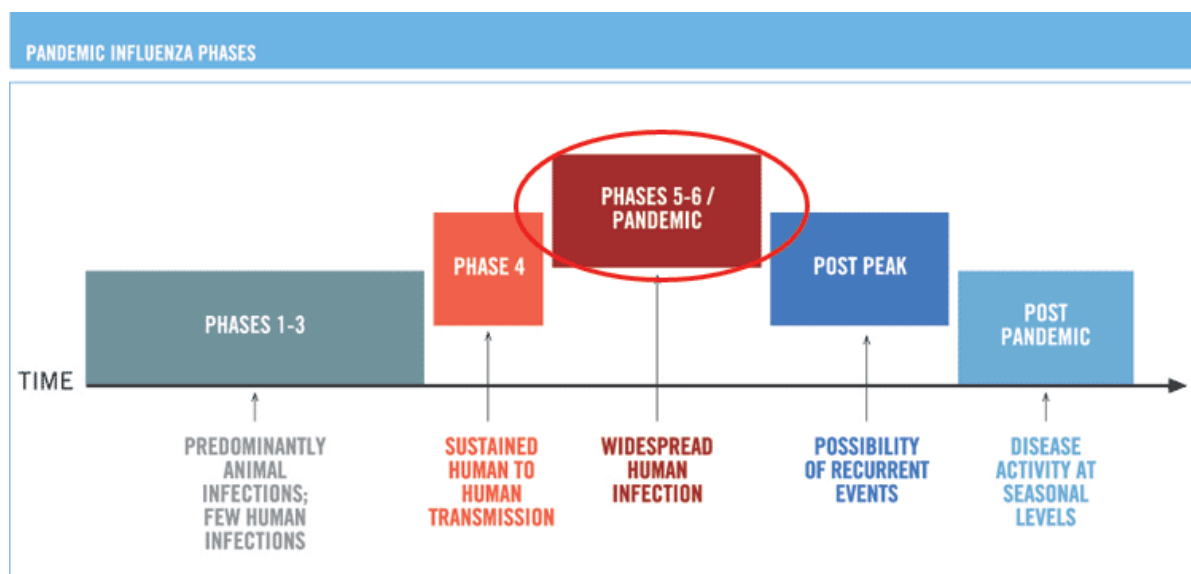
If an influenza pandemic were to occur today, we could expect:

- the pandemic virus to spread rapidly due to the high level of global traffic;
- vaccines, antiviral agents and antibiotics to treat secondary infections to be in short supply, with a period of several months before any vaccine becomes available;
- medical facilities to be overwhelmed with demands to care for both influenza and non-influenza patients;
- widespread illness to result in sudden and potentially significant shortages of personnel to provide essential community services.

We are currently at WHO Pandemic Phase 6.

What are WHO pandemic phases?*

In the 2009 revision of the phase descriptions, WHO has retained the use of a six-phased approach for easy incorporation of new recommendations and approaches into existing national preparedness and response plans. The grouping and description of pandemic phases have been revised to make them easier to understand, more precise, and based upon observable phenomena. Phases 1–3 correlate with preparedness, including capacity development and response planning activities, while Phases 4–6 clearly signal the need for response and mitigation efforts. Furthermore, periods after the first pandemic wave are elaborated to facilitate post pandemic recovery activities.



** Information taken from WHO website (www.who.int)

Q&As on Novel Influenza A (H1N1) – contd.

What about severity?*

At this time, WHO considers the overall severity of the influenza pandemic to be moderate. This assessment is based on scientific evidence available to WHO, as well as input from its Member States on the pandemic's impact on their health systems, and their social and economic functioning.

The moderate assessment reflects that:

1. Most people recover from infection without the need for hospitalization or medical care.
2. Overall, national levels of severe illness from influenza A(H1N1) appear similar to levels seen during local seasonal influenza periods, although high levels of disease have occurred in some local areas and institutions.
3. Overall, hospitals and health care systems in most countries have been able to cope with the numbers of people seeking care, although some facilities and systems have been stressed in some localities.

For more details on severity:

http://www.who.int/csr/disease/swineflu/frequently_asked_questions/levels_pandemic_alert/en/index.html

What does it mean by being at Phase 6?*

Phase 6 is characterized by community level outbreaks in at least one other country in a different WHO region in addition to the criteria defined in Phase 5. Designation of this phase will indicate that a global pandemic is under way.

More details on WHO Phase: http://www.who.int/csr/disease/avian_influenza/phase/en/index.html

Also see: <http://www.who.int/csr/disease/influenza/GIPA3AideMemoire.pdf>

Is it safe to travel?*

WHO is not recommending travel restrictions related to the outbreak of the Novel H1N1 influenza virus. Today, international travel moves rapidly, with large numbers of individuals visiting various parts the world. Limiting travel and imposing travel restrictions would have very little effect on stopping the virus from spreading, but would be highly disruptive to the global community.

Travelers can protect themselves and others by following simple recommendations related to travel aimed at preventing the spread of infection. Individuals who are ill should delay travel plans and returning travelers who fall ill should seek appropriate medical care. These recommendations are prudent measures which can limit the spread of many communicable diseases and not only the Novel H1N1 influenza virus.

** Information taken from WHO website (www.who.int)

Q&As on Prevention & Treatment

Are there medicines to treat Novel H1N1 influenza?*

Yes. US CDC recommends the use of the antivirals oseltamivir or zanamivir for the treatment and/or prevention of infection with these novel H1N1 influenza viruses. Antiviral drugs are prescription medicines (pills, liquid or an inhaler) that fight against the influenza by keeping influenza viruses from reproducing in your body. If you get sick, antiviral drugs can make your illness milder and make you feel better faster. They may also prevent serious influenza complications. During the current outbreak, the priority use of influenza antiviral drugs is to treat severe influenza illness.

Is there a vaccine for Novel H1N1 influenza?

Vaccines against the Novel H1N1 influenza are currently under development.

How can I protect myself from getting Novel H1N1 influenza from infected people?*

Practice general preventive measures for influenza to prevent infection:

- Avoid close contact with people who appear unwell and who have fever and cough.
- Wash your hands with soap and water thoroughly and often.
- Practice good health habits including adequate sleep, eating nutritious food, and keeping physically active.

How do I care for an ill person at home?*

- Separate the ill person from others, keeping the patient at least 1 meter in distance from others.
- Cover mouth and nose when caring for the ill person. Either commercial or homemade materials are fine, as long as they are disposed of or cleaned properly after use.
- Wash your hands with soap and water thoroughly after each contact with the ill person.
- Improve the air flow where the ill person stays. Use doors and windows to take advantage of breezes.
- Keep the environment clean with readily available household cleaning agents.

If you are living in a country where Novel H1N1 influenza has caused disease in humans, follow additional advice from national and local health authorities.

What should I do if I think I have Novel H1N1 influenza?*

If you feel unwell, have high fever, cough and/or sore throat:

- Stay at home and keep away from work, school or crowds.
- Rest and take plenty of fluids.
- Cover your mouth and nose with disposable tissues when coughing and sneezing, and dispose of the used tissues properly.
- Wash your hands with soap and water often and thoroughly, especially after coughing or sneezing.
- Inform family and friends about your illness and try to avoid contact with other people.

What precautions are pharmaceutical employees and their families taking against this pandemic threat?

Like other families, we are following the advice of our national and local health authorities.

* Information taken from CDC website (www.cdc.gov)

** Information taken from WHO website (www.who.int)