

May 2009

Swine flu

The current swine flu outbreak around the world is caused by influenza A viruses that contain gene elements from swine, avian and humans. It started to affect persons in Mexico in March 2009 and since then has spread to USA, Canada, several countries in Europe, New Zealand, Israel and many other countries around the world have suspected cases. The virus has demonstrated sustained human to human transmission leading WHO to declare pandemic level 5 with the swine flu as of 29 April 2009. Most human cases of swine flu have occurred in previously healthy children and young adults. Symptoms are similar to classic flu with fever, runny nose, sore throat, cough, vomiting, diarrhea. Most cases have been mild but there have been significant number of deaths in Mexico and a single death in USA.

The transmission of flu is mostly via droplets produced by an infected person when she /he coughs or sneezes. Infected individuals may also contaminate surfaces with their secretions. Surfaces can harbor infectious material for longer periods of time. Because all influenza viruses have the ability to change, scientists are concerned that the current H1N1 virus could change or mutate to a more virulent form that is capable of spreading more easily from person to person and causing severe disease leading to an influenza pandemic that is capable of causing millions of deaths worldwide. Because swine flu viruses do not commonly infect humans, there is little or no immune protection against them in the human population. Currently available flu vaccine does not protect against swine flu and vaccine production against this strain is expected to take several months.

What can we do?

If you have a flu like illness without any history of travel to swine flu affected countries in the past one week, we suggest that you stay away from school or office. We are looking out for cases in travelers who have visited areas with swine flu outbreaks who may have been in contact with persons with the swine flu. If these persons develop influenza like illness, we would follow certain precautions. Simple measures like washing hands frequently cuts down the rates of infection. Surfaces, door knobs etc. need to be kept clean at home and in the work place. Alcohol based hand sanitizers can also be used especially if there is water shortage. Obtain the flu vaccine which will not protect you from the swine flu but it will protect against regular flu. Well cooked pork is safe to eat.

Antiviral medication such as oseltamivir (tamiflu) has been used effectively for prevention and treatment of swine flu in humans. Nepal has a small stock of this antiviral medication with the Health Ministry and it is believed that this or other antiviral medication will be available should there be cases of swine flu in Nepal. At CIWEC, we have a small stock of Oseltamivir and significant amounts of personal protective equipment for clinic use and will continue to monitor the situation around the world closely.

In the meantime, if you have a fever, postpone travel to and from countries with swine flu outbreak. Also, find out if there are any travel restrictions in the countries that you plan to visit. If you have traveled to a country experiencing a swine flu outbreak, monitor your health for one week after return and see a health care provider if fever or respiratory symptoms should develop.