

Symptoms to watch out for: some facts about swine flu

- Homa Khaleeli
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How can I tell if I have swine flu?

According to Professor Steve Field of the Royal College of General Practitioners, swine flu and seasonal flu have similar symptoms: a sustained temperature of 38C (100F) or above, aching muscles, coughing and a congested or runny nose. And you may suffer from diarrhoea, profound tiredness and lose your appetite. The NHS direct website has created a web tool that you can check with if you think you are infected (nhsdirect.nhs.uk). But only a swab test carried out by a doctor can confirm whether or not you have swine flu.

How did I catch it?

Swine flu is highly contagious and spreads like seasonal flu, through spray from the nose or mouth. If you are talking or standing close to someone on public transport, you could breathe in this spray. Or you can catch swine flu by touching surfaces that an infected person has touched after coughing or sneezing into their hands. The virus can live on hard surfaces for up to 24 hours, and soft surfaces for 20 minutes.

The incubation period lasts around a week, and you will be at your most infectious soon afterwards. Once you lose your symptoms you are no longer likely to be passing on the disease. To stop the virus spreading, you need to wash your hands and sneeze into a tissue - then throw it away.

What should I do now?

People who are at risk from being seriously ill with any kind of flu are the elderly and those who have existing health problems, such as lung disease, a heart condition or diabetes. With swine flu, children under five and pregnant women can also be badly affected. All those who are in this "at risk" category should call their doctor if they think they have swine flu. They are likely to be given Tamiflu, an antiviral drug.

Sufferers should not go to their doctor's surgery in case they spread the virus. And unless it is particularly severe, you can just treat it as you would normal flu, ie, by resting, drinking lots of fluids and keeping your temperature down. The severity of the symptoms may vary, but the flu is likely to last about a week.

There have been a tiny number of cases around the world where healthy people have had severe symptoms, however: if things get bad, call a doctor.

<http://www.guardian.co.uk/world/2009/jul/03/swine-flu-symptoms-facts>