

## **What is swine flu/influenza A?**

Swine flu is a disease with a mild course in the great majority of cases. It is a virus disease. The virus is similar in swine flu and seasonal flu (the flu of normal winters). Swine flu can produce fever, headache, muscle pain, general malaise, nasal congestion, cough, and sometimes digestive symptoms. Swine flu has the same symptoms as seasonal flu.

## **How do people get infected?**

Transmission is the same as seasonal flu, because it is transmitted through the droplets that we emit when speaking, coughing or sneezing. We name it as pandemic because there are many people affected in many different countries. It is a new virus A and we have no defence against it. But being very infectious does not mean that it is more severe.

## **About the diagnosis**

There is a quick laboratory test for the diagnosis, but in the case of the swine flu it has low sensibility, of about 35%. That means that even if the test is negative, if you have flu symptoms you may have swine flu (in more than half of the cases, 65%). And what is more important, the advice for caring yourself will be the same in all types of flu.

So the test is not useful for mild cases.

## **What can be the expected course of the flu?**

Data coming from the winter season in the South hemisphere show that most cases (around 95%) have mild or moderate symptoms.

The course of the disease might be more complicated in chronic complicated patients (for example, immunosuppressant diseases), children under 6 months, or patients with some risk factors.

## **How to avoid infection?**

Basic recommendations are:

1.- Frequent hand-washing (for example, we know that washing hands ten times a day reduces the risk in 50%).

2.- Respiratory hygiene (for example, coughing or sneezing in disposable paper handkerchief and washing hands later; coughing or sneezing on your arm to avoid hand contact; avoiding physical contact when the symptoms are obvious).

We do not know if the surgical mask avoids the spread of the epidemic. It is only recommended for sick patients when they are in contact with other people and for the persons who care for them.

It is unclear if the anti-virus (oseltamivir-Tamiflu® or zanamivir-Relenza®) stop transmission. Some studies in institutions (as nursing homes) and in family contacts have proved very small benefits. Having in mind that it is a mild flu and these drugs have side effects, the routine use is not recommended.

Seasonal flu vaccination is not effective for swine flu. New vaccinations are not yet in the market. We know nothing about its security and effectiveness. In the present moment there are reasons for keeping calm in view of the number of people affected and number of deaths.

### **What to do in case of symptoms?**

As stated before, the swine flu symptoms are the same as the seasonal flu. As the old adage says: “the flu last 7 days with treatment and one week without it”.

Those people who have severe symptoms should contact their doctor; for example, dyspnoea, breathlessness, chest pain, fainting, sudden worsening of symptoms, or symptoms during more than seven days. Children should contact their doctor if they are under 6 months, or have dyspnoea, breathlessness, or fever for more than three days (72 hours).

Most people will have mild symptoms and they will obtain no benefit from the doctor. On the contrary, the wrong use of health services overwhelm them and difficult the correct care of severe flu patients or severe cases in general. So healthy people with mild flu symptoms can carry out their self-care in their own homes with good hygiene and keeping themselves well hydrated and nourished.

When suffering from flu it is convenient to avoid crowded places during the first five days. And please remember the recommendations: do not cough without protection, and wash your hand frequently.

### **If symptoms appear, is it necessary to take drugs?**

Fever by itself is not dangerous. Treat it when there is general malaise. Anti-virus drugs have not proven effective in infections by seasonal flu; at most they decrease symptoms in less than one day. And considering the swine flu we even lack any probe of efficiency.

For these reasons anti-virus treatment must be apply only to patients suffering from complications or those who high risk of suffering them. In previously healthy people the risk of side effect can be bigger than the benefits.

### **What about pregnancy?**

It is well known that pregnancy implies a small increase of the risk for complications in either type of flu (seasonal or swine). Being pregnant does not increase the risk of suffering from swine flu. In case of symptoms it is recommended to contact their doctor.

Nevertheless the risk is still very low and a great majority of pregnancies will have a healthy outcome.

### **Conclusions**

During the swine flu pandemic there will still be myocardial infarction, appendicitis, cardiac failure, diabetes, asthma attack, psychiatry diseases, hip fractures, accidents and thousands of other illness that require medical attention. It is important that patients suffering from swine flu do not panic and overwhelm the system, so hospitals and doctors can continue to treat all patients. For that, it is essential to keep calm and have common sense and self-control in all levels, patients, health professionals, decision makers, politicians and the media.

### **To know more, some selected references:**

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