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## FACTSHEET

May 14, 2009

Ministry of Healthy Living and Sport  
Ministry of Health Services

### WHAT IS SWINE INFLUENZA (SWINE FLU)

#### 1) What is swine influenza or swine flu?

- Swine influenza or swine flu is a respiratory disease of pigs caused by type A influenza virus that regularly infects pigs. Swine flu viruses do not normally infect humans; however, human infections with swine flu do occur and cases of person-to-person spread of these viruses have been documented.
- Swine flu viruses cause high levels of infection and low death rates in pigs. These viruses may circulate among swine throughout the year, but most outbreaks occur during the late fall and winter months similar to outbreaks in humans. The classical swine flu virus (an influenza type A H1N1 virus) was first isolated from a pig in 1930.

#### 2) Swine Flu in humans

- Swine flu viruses do not normally infect humans. However, sporadic human infections with swine flu have occurred. Most commonly, these cases occur in persons with direct exposure to pigs. In addition, cases have been documented of one person spreading swine flu to others.

#### 3) How does swine flu spread?

- Influenza viruses can be directly transmitted from pigs to people and from person to person. Human infection with flu viruses from pigs are most likely to occur when people are near infected pigs.
- Spread of swine flu from person to person can also occur. This is thought to occur in the same way as seasonal flu occurs in people, which is mainly spread person to person through coughing or sneezing by people infected with the influenza virus. People may become infected by touching something with flu viruses or germs on it and then touching their mouth or nose. Germs on hard surfaces, such as counters and doorknobs, can be picked up on hands and spread to the respiratory system when people touch their mouth or nose.

#### 4) What are the symptoms of the H1N1 flu virus in humans?

- The symptoms of the H1N1 flu virus in people are similar to the symptoms of regular human seasonal influenza and include high fever, cough, headache, general aches, fatigue, eye pain, shortness of breath, and lack of appetite. Some people with swine flu have also reported runny nose, sore throat, nausea, vomiting and diarrhea.

#### 5) How can the H1N1 flu virus (or any flu) be prevented?

- You can reduce the risk of getting the H1N1 flu virus or spreading it to others by taking standard precautionary measures:
  - Wash your hands regularly, especially after you cough or sneeze.

- Cover your nose and mouth with a tissue when you cough or sneeze, and throw the tissue in the trash after you use it.
- Avoid touching your eyes, nose or mouth, as germs can spread that way.
- Avoid close contact with people who are sick.
- If you get sick, stay at home and limit contact with others to keep from infecting them.
- If you are sick, are symptomatic and you have to go out in public, consider wearing a mask to help prevent the spread of the flu virus.

**6) How can human infections with the H1N1 flu virus be diagnosed?**

- Most cases can be diagnosed by your doctor.
- To confirm an infection of the H1N1 flu virus, a respiratory specimen would need to be collected generally within the first four to five days of illness, during the time when an infected person is most likely to be shedding the virus. However, some persons, especially children, may shed the virus for 10 days or longer.
- Identification of the H1N1 flu virus requires sending a specimen from the person with the infection to the provincial laboratories at the BC Centre for Disease Control for testing.

**7) Can people catch swine flu from eating pork?**

- No. Swine influenza viruses are not transmitted by food. You can not get swine flu from eating pork or pork products. Eating properly handled and cooked pork or eating pork products is safe. Cooking pork to an internal temperature of 160°F (70°C) kills the swine flu virus as it does other bacteria and viruses.

**8) What medications are available to treat swine flu infections in humans?**

- Currently antiviral drugs prescribed by doctors can be used for treatment of the illness when indicated.

**9) Is there a vaccine for swine flu?**

- Vaccines are available to be given to pigs to prevent swine flu. A vaccine is being developed to protect people from the H1N1 flu virus.
- The seasonal influenza vaccine is recommended for individuals to offer protection against the seasonal strains that may be circulating, regardless of whether a novel strain has emerged.
- Canada has a plan and contract with a manufacturer to research and produce a vaccine for an influenza pandemic virus once it is identified, so production can start as soon as possible.

**10) Does British Columbia have a stockpile of antivirals?**

- Yes, B.C. has a large supply of antivirals to be used in the event of a severe pandemic.

**11) Is the H1N1 swine flu virus the same as human H1N1 viruses?**

- No. The H1N1 swine flu viruses are somewhat different from human H1N1 viruses and, therefore, vaccines for human seasonal flu are not expected to provide significant protection from H1N1 swine flu viruses.

**12) How many swine flu viruses are there?**

- Like all influenza viruses, swine flu viruses change constantly. Pigs can be infected by avian influenza and human influenza viruses as well as swine influenza viruses. When influenza viruses from different species infect pigs, the viruses can re-assort, swapping genes, and new viruses that are a mix of swine, human and/or avian influenza viruses can emerge. Over the years, different variations of swine flu viruses have emerged. At this time, there are four main influenza type A virus subtypes that have been isolated in pigs: H1N1, H1N2, H3N2, and H3N1. However, most of the recently isolated influenza viruses from pigs have been H1N1 or H3N2 viruses.

**13) How common is swine flu among pigs?**

- H1N1 and H3N2 swine flu viruses are common among pig populations in North America and something that the industry deals with routinely. Outbreaks among pigs normally occur in colder weather months in the late fall and winter and sometimes with the introduction of new pigs into susceptible herds. Studies have shown that the swine flu H1N1 is common throughout pig populations worldwide, with 25 percent of animals showing antibody evidence of infection. Human infections with swine flu H1N1 viruses are rare.

**14) When should I see a doctor?**

- If you have been to a country where swine flu in humans is being reported and you have symptoms of a new respiratory illness with fever, you should contact your doctor or call HealthLink BC at 8-1-1 to discuss your symptoms. Make sure to tell your doctor about your travel history.

You can call [HealthLink BC](#) at **8-1-1**, 24 hours a day/seven days a week to speak to a nurse if you have more questions or if feeling ill.