

4th May 2009

Health protection starts with hygiene

Influenza A (H1N1) (swine flu) is spreading worldwide. It is caused by a new strain of the Type A influenza virus. Its genetic material consists of genes from influenza viruses in pigs, humans and birds. In Germany there are already a few cases of this new form of flu. In order to prevent it from spreading, it is particularly important to practise basic hygiene.

Here is the most important information for the residents of Berlin:

How is influenza A (H1N1) (swine flu) spread?

Human-to-human transmission occurs in the same way as with a “normal” seasonal influenza infection, i.e. predominantly by droplet infection, such as from coughing or sneezing. However, even shaking hands can spread the virus.

Which people are in danger?

Any person who has had direct contact in the last 7 days with a probable or confirmed case of swine flu is in danger. In addition to this, a stay in a risk zone (for current information see <http://www.rki.de/EN/Home>) counts as a risk. If such a person develops flu-like symptoms, they should see a doctor, having first notified the surgery by telephone.

What are the early symptoms of swine flu?

The symptoms are similar to those of the “normal” seasonal flu. Typical symptoms include a fever, aching limbs, blocked or runny nose, sore throat or a cough.


Can you get ill by eating pork?

Swine flu viruses are not believed to be transmitted through foodstuffs. To be absolutely sure, care should be taken to cook pork properly all the way through before eating.

What should travellers watch for on their return from Mexico?

The appropriate information will be handed out to travellers on their departure. This will ask them to watch for typical symptoms of flu (fever, cold symptoms) in the first 7 days after their return. In addition to this, basic hygiene recommendations should be followed especially closely. However, the returning travellers can go about their daily lives as normal. If symptoms develop in the first 7 days after returning from Mexico, please see a doctor, having first notified the surgery by telephone.

How can the spread of swine flu be prevented?

Particular attention should be paid to generally recommended personal hygiene measures, especially when in contact with travellers returning from affected areas. Influenza viruses are transmitted primarily by droplet infection. Especially when sneezing or coughing, germs can end up on hands and thus be spread further. Frequent hand washing with soap and water is therefore recommended, as well as keeping hands away from the face, as germs can easily be transferred to the mucus membranes in the eyes, nose and mouth. It is best to cough into a sleeve. Complete information on personal protective measures against viral infections can be found in the leaflet “Self-defence against viruses”, which can be accessed at www.wir-gegen-viren.de .

Does it make sense to close public buildings?

No, such measures are entirely unnecessary at present.

What should I do if I suspect I have swine flu?

At the moment, it is only possible to contract swine flu after spending time in a risk area in the last 7 days (for current information see also www.rki.de/EN/Home) or coming into direct contact with an infected person. If someone suspects that they are infected with swine flu, they should see a doctor, so that the doctor can examine the affected person and treat them if necessary. The doctor should be notified in advance of the concern by telephone.

Can swine flu be treated medicinally?

As far as is currently known, typical medication against influenza viruses, the neuraminidase inhibitors oseltamivir (Tamiflu) and zanamivir (Relenza), are effective against swine flu. They prevent spread of the virus inside the body and alleviate the symptoms. If the attending doctor/GP has reason to suspect influenza, he/she will write a prescription for the medicine, which can then be collected at a pharmacy. There should be a sufficient supply of Tamiflu available in pharmacies or at wholesale and manufacturer level. In addition, the Berlin health administration is stockpiling approx. 700,000 units.

How long will it be until a vaccination is available?

Since the swine flu pathogens constitute a new virus, the corresponding vaccination must first be developed. This is expected to take several months. It is not yet known whether vaccinations against the conventional seasonal flu provide any additional protection against swine flu.