

Protect yourself. Protect others.

# H1N1 Influenza 09 (Human Swine Flu)

## Frequently asked questions for the general public

23 June 2009

### THE BASICS

<b>What is Human swine flu?</b> H1N1 Influenza 09 (Human Swine Flu) is a respiratory disease caused by a new influenza virus. Victoria has had confirmed cases of Human Swine Flu since 20 May 2009.	<b>How does it spread?</b> The same way seasonal flu spreads, mainly from person to person through coughing or sneezing. People may become infected by touching an object or surface with flu viruses on it, and then touching their mouth or nose.
<b>What are the symptoms?</b> They are similar to regular flu and include fever, cough, sore throat, body aches, headache, chills and fatigue. Some people have reported diarrhoea and vomiting associated with Human Swine Flu. The virus has so far been mild and can be compared to normal seasonal flu.	<b>How long is a person infectious for?</b> For as long as they are showing symptoms, and for up to three days after the illness started. Children, especially younger children, might potentially be infectious for longer periods. However early use of antivirals such as Tamiflu reduces this relatively quickly.

### WHERE TO GET THE MOST UP TO DATE HUMAN SWINE FLU INFORMATION

#### FOR THE LATEST INFORMATION:

- Visit [www.health.vic.gov.au](http://www.health.vic.gov.au)
- Call the National Influenza Hotline on 180 2007 or
- Call Nurse-on-Call on 1300 60 60 24 – for expert health information and advice (24 hours, 7 days)
- Follow us on Twitter, VicGovHealth (<http://twitter.com/vicgovhealth>)

#### SCHOOLS:

- Visit the website of the Department of Education and Early Childhood Development at: [www.education.vic.gov.au/](http://www.education.vic.gov.au/)

# CURRENT FLU SITUATION

## What is the current status of Human Swine Flu in Victoria?

Victoria is now in the 'Protect' phase of its pandemic plan for dealing with Human Swine Flu.

## What does the 'Protect' phase mean for Victoria?

The key elements of the 'Protect' phase in Victoria are:

- Limiting school closures - instead the focus is on keeping school children with acute (rapid onset of) flu-like illness at home, away from school.
- Controlling outbreaks in high-risk institutional settings, such as special schools and aged care facilities.
- Treating people from high-risk groups, such as pregnant women, the morbidly obese and people who suffer from chronic illness and respiratory illness.
- People with mild flu-like symptoms are asked to stay at home until they are well. However, contacts will not be placed into quarantine.

Dedicated flu clinics continue to operate across Victoria to support our emergency departments. A dedicated website (<http://humanswineflu.health.vic.gov.au/>) is providing the latest information about Human Swine Flu in Victoria, as well as useful resources for the general public and health professionals.

## What, if anything, should people do differently under the new 'Protect' phase?

The 'Protect' phase is less restrictive, however good health hygiene remains vital. You can minimise your chances of catching and spreading Human Swine Flu by adopting good hygiene practices:

- Cover your nose and mouth with a tissue when you cough or sneeze.
- Throw the tissue in a plastic-lined rubbish bin after you use it.
- Wash your hands often with soap and water, especially after you cough or sneeze. Alcohol-based hands cleaners are also effective.
- Avoid touching your eyes, nose or mouth. Germs spread that way.

## Why has Australia developed the new 'Protect' response phase to manage the outbreak of Human Swine Flu?

'Protect' is the most appropriate national response, given what we have learned about Human Swine Flu to date. 'Protect' recognises that this new strain of flu is not as severe as originally thought – the symptoms are mild in most cases, severe in some and therefore moderate overall. The overwhelming majority of patients are making a rapid and full recovery without treatment.

'Protect' is a measured, reasonable and proportionate health response to the risk that the virus poses to the Australian community. 'Protect' sits alongside the 'Contain' and 'Sustain' phases, with a greater focus on the people at risk of more severe flu-like symptoms.

## What is the current World Health Organisation pandemic level?

The World Health Organisation (WHO) alert level remains in Phase 6. This phase is characterised by community level outbreaks in at least one other country, in a different WHO region from the source country. It indicates there is sustained human to human, community level transmission.

At this time the WHO considers the overall severity of the H1N1 Influenza 09 (Human Swine Flu) pandemic to be moderate.

## What is community transmission?

Community transmission means that people become unwell with flu, but in most cases have no idea from whom they got the virus. When a person catches the illness from a family member or a work colleague, the link to another case of flu is clear. When this link is not clear, for more than a minority of cases, the virus is described as community transmission. The person became unwell from spread somewhere in the community, perhaps from surfaces contaminated with the virus or from people coughing close to them in the community.

## Will the 'Protect' phase affect my travel plans?

The 'Protect' phase means a return to normal operations at Australia's international airports. Border surveillance and screening measures will no longer be in place during the 'Protect' phase. However airlines will still be required to provide mandatory reporting of sick travellers, in order to identify and provide medical assistance to those travellers.

It is business as usual in terms of travel, whether for business or leisure. There are no quarantine requirements for any returning travellers unless they have flu-like symptoms.

## What does the 'Protect' phase mean for attending public events?

Gatherings of people at football matches, church services, concerts or on public transport, will not be discouraged during the protect phase. This is because the disease is mild in most people. However there are two important considerations for people attending gatherings of large numbers of people.

People who are unwell with flu-like symptoms should try to isolate themselves from others, to help protect their neighbours and the community. This includes staying away from gatherings and trying to limit the spread of the illness.

## FLU SYMPTOMS and HIGH-RISK GROUPS

### What can I do to prevent catching and spreading Human swine Flu?

You can minimise your chances of catching and spreading Human Swine Flu by adopting good hygiene practices:

- Cover your nose and mouth with a tissue when you cough or sneeze.
- Throw the tissue in a plastic-lined rubbish bin after you use it.
- Wash your hands often with soap and water, especially after you cough or sneeze. Alcohol-based hands cleaners are also effective.
- Avoid touching your eyes, nose or mouth. Germs spread that way.

**Be immunised** - the seasonal flu vaccine is not expected to provide protection against Human Swine Flu, however it is still recommended as protection against seasonal flu for people aged over 65, and for those with chronic medical conditions.

### How do I know if I have Human Swine Flu?

The symptoms of Human Swine Flu in people are similar to the symptoms of regular flu and include fever, cough, runny or stuffy nose, sore throat, body aches, headache, chills and fatigue. Some people have diarrhoea and vomiting associated with Human Swine Flu. Like seasonal flu, the symptoms of Human Swine Flu can vary from mild to severe.

### How serious is the H1N1 strain of flu?

This illness is classified as 'moderate'. This means the majority (95%) of cases are mild. However 5% of cases are severe, which means that those affected may require hospitalisation and intensive care.

This is a new flu strain and as with any new strain of flu there is a possibility of someone dying. This is more likely to occur in high-risk groups, but is also possible in the general population, including young adults and adolescents.

#### Normal seasonal flu – the facts:

- Up to one million Australians contract normal seasonal flu every year.
- On average 2,500 people die from normal seasonal flu each year.

Currently, the vast majority of people experiencing mild flu-like symptoms are making a full recovery, without receiving any medical treatment.

## What should I do if I feel unwell with flu-like symptoms?

Help protect yourself and others from flu by taking these steps if you feel unwell:

- People with **mild** flu-like illness should stay home and avoid contact with other people until your symptoms have fully stopped.
- People who are **moderately** unwell with flu-like symptoms should call ahead then visit their doctor.
- Only people who are **seriously** unwell should visit a hospital emergency department.

Close contacts and people living in the same house as someone with flu-like symptoms, will not be placed into quarantine.

Only people who are at higher risk of complications from flu will be given antiviral treatment. If you are recovering at home make sure you get plenty of rest, drink plenty of fluids and use a pain reliever for aches\*. This is adequate for recovery in most cases.

\*A non-aspirin pain reliever should be used by children and young adults because of the risk of Reye's syndrome.

## When should someone seek medical care?

A person should seek medical care if they experience shortness of breath or difficulty breathing, especially if you are concerned about symptoms, or they become worse. For parents with a young child who is ill with flu-like symptoms, seek medical care immediately if the child has fast or strained/laboured breathing, continuing fever or convulsions (fits/seizures).

If you have any of the following symptoms, you should definitely seek medical help.

- shortness of breath
- difficulty breathing or chest pain
- confusion or disorientation
- inability to keep liquids down because of vomiting
- you become dehydrated (dizzy when standing, passing much less urine than normal)

## Who is most at risk of complications from flu?

You are considered to be at higher-risk of complications from flu if:

- You are pregnant
- You are morbidly obese
- You suffer from a chronic illness such as diabetes
- You suffer from any respiratory illness such as asthma

If you are concerned you should speak to your doctor. High-risk groups are sometimes also referred to as 'vulnerable' groups.

## What should people from high-risk groups do?

If you suffer flu-like symptoms (fever, cough, muscle aches) and you are part of a high-risk group, you should contact your doctor or the flu clinic so that you can be assessed. Your doctor may wish to perform pathology testing (a throat or nose swab) and prescribe antiviral medication.

Antiviral medication is most effective if taken in the first 48 hours of flu symptoms starting, so it is important if you are part of a high-risk group to seek medical care early.

## Should I wear a mask?

If you are not sick you do not have to wear a mask. Masks provide little benefit or protection if you are well.

Face masks are only really effective when worn by someone who is sick, to help prevent the virus spreading. You should wear a surgical mask when seeking medical attention, or when in close company of people in high-risk groups (see list above).

## **How will we know whether this virus has become this year's seasonal flu strain?**

Throughout winter, testing will continue to identify if the variant Human Swine Flu is the predominant virus causing infection, or whether other seasonal influenza viruses are causing infections as well. This data is routinely included to help identify if there is a dominant strain. There is no way to predict whether this virus will replace seasonal influenza this year, or whether it will be an added burden on top of the usual flu strains in our community.

## **ANTIVIRAL MEDICATION**

### **What is Tamiflu?**

Tamiflu is an antiviral medication that can be prescribed by a doctor to prevent the flu virus spreading inside your body. If started within 48 hours of the first symptoms of flu appearing, Tamiflu can:

- reduce the severity of flu symptoms
- reduce the length of time you are infectious
- reduce the time it takes you to recover from the illness.

In the 'Protect' phase Tamiflu will not be provided to people who have mild flu-like symptoms, unless they belong to a high-risk group or setting. Some testing will be continued for surveillance purposes, at hospitals and community level.

Currently, the vast majority of people experience mild flu-like symptoms and make a rapid and full recovery, without receiving any medical treatment.

### **Will antiviral medication still be used to treat people who have flu in the 'Protect' phase?**

The new phase signals a move to identifying and managing people in whom flu symptoms may be severe. People who will be given antiviral therapy in the 'Protect' phase are people from high-risk groups, such as pregnant women, the morbidly obese and people who suffer from chronic illness and respiratory illness. The focus will also be on controlling outbreaks in high-risk institutional settings, such as special schools and aged care facilities.

### **Will front line healthcare professionals be given access to antiviral medication?**

The agreed antiviral policy now focuses on giving antivirals to those with moderate or severe symptoms, and those vulnerable to severe outcomes, rather than slowing the general transmission of the virus. GP and front line workers will receive treatment if they become infected AND have moderate or severe disease, OR are more vulnerable to the severe outcomes.

### **How will antiviral medication be distributed?**

Victoria is providing antiviral medication through a network of community pharmacies on prescription from the GP.

Other states have alternative mechanisms in place or are establishing them currently, to distribute both antivirals and protective equipment.

### **Will more people be tested under the 'Protect' response, or does it mean a scaling down of testing?**

Under the 'Protect' response, the testing of all potential cases of flu is not required. This is because most cases are mild and people do not require medical treatment to recover.

### **When will a vaccine be available?**

A vaccine is currently being worked on. Its use if developed is yet to fully be determined.

# SCHOOLS and CHILDREN

## School policy

School policies continue to be important in the 'Protect' phase, however, regional or widespread closure of schools is not considered a proportionate, nor appropriate, intervention for Human Swine Flu, where symptoms have been 'mild in most'.

In the 'Protect' phase:

- Most importantly, children with flu-like illness should not attend school.
- If a child becomes sick with a flu-like illness at school they should be sent home.

## QUARANTINE

### What is the situation with isolation and quarantine?

**Isolation** is recommended for people who are unwell with flu-like symptoms. They are encouraged to stay at home while they have symptoms. In particular, people who are unwell should avoid close contact with anyone from a high-risk group.

**Quarantine** describes the restriction of movements of people who are well, but who may be incubating the flu virus following their exposure to the virus. Mostly quarantine will not be required during the 'Protect' phase.

## WORK and BUSINESSES

### Infection control for the workplace

During the 'Protect' phase, workplaces should focus on promoting good hand hygiene to their workforce. This includes encouraging all staff to:

- Cover your nose and mouth with a tissue when you cough or sneeze.
- Throw the tissue in a plastic-lined rubbish bin after you use it.
- Wash your hands often with soap and water, especially after you cough or sneeze. Alcohol-based hand cleaners are also effective.
- Avoid touching your eyes, nose or mouth. Germs spread that way.

Visit [www.health.vic.gov.au](http://www.health.vic.gov.au) to download hand hygiene posters for your workplace.

Employers should also:

- Ensure materials needed for hand and respiratory hygiene are readily available in the workplace e.g. tissues, plastic-lined rubbish bins, soap and hand washing facilities and/or alcohol-based hand sanitizers).
- Encourage and support staff members with flu-like illness to stay at home until they are well (that is until their symptoms have completely stopped).
- Encourage visitors/customers with flu-like illness to stay away from the workplace until they are well (that is until their symptoms have completely stopped).
- Encouraging individuals to assess whether they are in the higher-risk group of complications of flu.

### What is the Government doing?

We have the best health experts working on this.

Victoria continues to closely monitor this new flu strain by:

- Investigating severe cases of flu, to help us understand more about the virus and who may be most at risk.
- Following our pandemic plan. This includes:
  - focusing treatment on the most vulnerable, high risk groups
  - working with GPs, pharmacies and hospitals
  - concentrating our efforts and resources where there is most need, where there are most flu cases.

## ADVICE FOR TRAVELLERS

To help stay healthy while travelling you should practice good hand hygiene (regular and thorough washing and drying of hands or alcohol-based cleaners) and respiratory etiquette (covering mouth and nose when sneezing and coughing).

Consult a doctor or the nearest hospital immediately if you develop moderate or severe flu-like symptoms. Visit [www.smartraveller.gov.au](http://www.smartraveller.gov.au) for the latest travel advice.

## MORE INFORMATION

**Where can I find out more information about the situation with Human Swine Flu in Victoria?**

You should visit [www.health.vic.gov.au](http://www.health.vic.gov.au) or call the National Influenza Hotline on 180 2007.