

# Did you know?



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## Swine flu

On 24 April 2009, Federal Health authorities in Australia were notified by the World Health Organization (WHO) of outbreaks in Mexico, Canada, the USA and Europe of a new Human Swine Influenza strain (H1N1), which there was little known. By 9 May 2009, Australia had its first confirmed case in Queensland.

By 3 June 2009, the total of confirmed Human Swine Influenza cases in Australia had risen to 502. All Australian states and territories now have at least one confirmed case.

In response, the Chief Medical Officer has arranged for 10 million courses of anti-virals (Tamiflu, Relenza, and CSL) costing the Federal Government more than \$43 million.

To date, a total of 74 new influenza A (H1N1) infection-related deaths have been reported from four countries: Mexico (68), United States of America (4), Canada (1) and Costa Rica (1). The majority of deaths have occurred in persons below 60 years of age.

### How is it caused?

An influenza pandemic is caused by a virus that is either entirely new or has not circulated recently and widely in the human population. This creates an almost universal vulnerability to infection. While not all people ever become infected during a pandemic, nearly all people are susceptible to infection.

Scientists anticipate that pre-existing immunity to the virus will be low or non-existent, or largely confined to older population groups. H1N1 appears to be more contagious than seasonal influenza. The secondary attack rate of seasonal influenza ranges from 5% to 15%. Current estimates of the secondary attack rate of H1N1 range from 22% to 33%.

Even a pandemic virus that initially causes mild symptoms in otherwise healthy people can be disruptive, especially under the conditions of today's highly mobile and closely interdependent societies. The occurrence of large numbers of people falling ill at or around the same time is one reason why pandemics are socially and economically disruptive, with a potential to temporarily overburden health services.

Pandemics usually have a concentrated adverse impact in specific age groups. In past pandemics, illnesses and deaths have concentrated in a young, economically productive age group. This has been more disruptive to economies than when the very young or very old are most commonly and severely affected, as seen during epidemics of seasonal influenza. In seasonal influenza, the overwhelming majority of deaths occur in persons of 65 years of age or more.

People with underlying chronic conditions, such as cardiovascular disease, hypertension, asthma, diabetes, rheumatoid arthritis, and several others, are more likely to experience severe or lethal infections. The prevalence of these conditions, combined with other factors such as nutritional status, can influence the severity of a pandemic in a significant way. When new influenza A (H1N1), termed Human Swine Influenza began spreading in Mexico, a substantial proportion of the cases of severe illness and death has occurred among young and previously healthy adults. As with seasonal flu, severe illness and deaths have also been reported in adults with underlying medical conditions including: chronic lung or cardiovascular disease, diabetes, immunodeficiencies and obesity. Moreover, pregnant women are at increased risk of complications from new influenza A (H1N1).

### **What can be done?**

One of the most effective ways to protect you, your friends and family from the flu (whether seasonal or pandemic) is to practise good personal hygiene. That includes regular washing of hands, covering your mouth and nose when coughing or sneezing and staying at least one metre from anyone who is unwell. People who have the flu should not go to work or school or attend other public gatherings.

For those individuals who believe that serious illness can never happen to them, now is the time to reconsider their opinion. For those individuals who contract Influenza A (H1N1), the impact upon them and their families could be substantial. As recovery may take weeks, it is worthwhile for all individuals to ensure they have adequate financial protection in place via adequate life insurance.

### **Summary**

Influenza A (H1N1), otherwise known as the Swine Flu, has caused a worldwide health impact. Advisers need to be aware of the implications and advise clients accordingly on their needs.

### **Important information**

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