



## **Pandemic Flu: Frequently Asked Questions**

### **Should I be worried about this flu?**

The two key things are: how severe is this flu, and how far it spreads. Its severity is still unknown. Whilst the reports show that some who died in Mexico were young adults who don't often die of flu, the cases picked up in the US were mild.

### **Will it spread to where I live?**

That depends, again, on two different things: whether the virus is transported to the UK and Ireland, and how efficiently it spreads between people.

So many people travel globally now that, as long as this virus keeps infecting people, it is unlikely *not* to get to the UK and Ireland. Five days can pass before an infected person shows symptoms, and the virus can spread before symptoms start.

The big question is how efficiently it spreads once it lands. It is known that it can spread from human to human, and has done so for weeks at least. However, similar swine flu viruses have jumped from pigs to people before and have always petered out without causing a pandemic because they were not good enough at spreading in people. This virus may do the same thing.

### **Does this virus mean I shouldn't eat pork?**

No. This virus is named swine flu because one of its surface proteins is most similar to viruses that usually infect pigs. But this particular virus is spreading in people and we don't yet know if it infects pigs. In any case, cooking kills the virus. As always, wash your hands after handling meat.

### **Can I travel to other countries?**

At a European Commission briefing, the EU health commissioner Andorra Vassiliou asked Europeans to postpone nonessential travel to the United States or Mexico.

The World Health Organisation however has called on countries not to close their borders, as epidemic models have shown this will have little effect on the spread of a pandemic.

### **What if it causes a pandemic?**

Most countries in the world have pandemic plans. They can respond with vaccines, drugs, and measures called "social distancing", aimed at limiting human contacts that spread flu. Mexico has already done this, by banning public gatherings and closing schools in affected areas. Modelling suggests this can be effective.

The Mexican swine flu virus is susceptible to the most widely stockpiled flu antiviral drugs, Tamiflu and its relatives. But viruses of the same family can readily develop resistance to these drugs, so no one knows how long the drugs will remain effective.

### **Why is it thought this virus could go pandemic?**

Because it is new. Flu constantly evolves, mostly with small changes to its surface proteins. There are usually enough differences between this year's flu and whatever you had last time to allow the new virus to evade your immune defences and cause an infection, but its similarities to your last case mean you still have partial immunity to it. Occasionally a new flu virus that has picked up completely new surface proteins from pig or bird flu viruses circulates in people. Since no humans have been exposed to it before, no one has any immunity. Those viruses cause pandemics. The Mexican swine flu is like this.

### **What should I do to prepare for a pandemic?**

We don't know yet if this will be one – but some preparation can't hurt. Cover coughs and sneezes and wash your hands a lot. Don't run down your ability to fight infection – eat well and be sensible.