

Frequently Asked Questions and Travel Advice Department of Health and Children and the HSE THE PANDEMIC (H1N1) 2009 OUTBREAK

Questions and Answers on Pandemic (H1N1) 2009

This page is updated as the situation changes, so please recheck this advice.

**24 Hour HSE Flu Information Line
Freephone 1800 94 11 00**

Name Change

The WHO has now changed the official name of the pandemic virus from Influenza A(H1N1) to Pandemic (H1N1) 2009. The new name will be used in future guidance documents on this website.

What is Pandemic (H1N1) 2009?

Pandemic (H1N1) 2009 is a new flu virus which has been circulating worldwide since April. The World Health Organisation has declared this to be pandemic – a flu epidemic that spreads around the world.

Does this flu spread easily?

The new flu virus appears to be highly contagious and can spread quickly from person to person through tiny drops in coughs and sneezes. If you are close to a person with flu you can breathe them in and become infected. Droplets can also be passed from surfaces like door handles and hand rails.

What are the symptoms of Pandemic (H1N1) 2009?

The symptoms are like those of normal seasonal flu and include: fever that begins very suddenly, severe fatigue, a cough, a sore throat, a runny nose, headache and muscle aches. Some people have vomiting and diarrhoea. While it is usually a mild disease some people may develop complications such as pneumonia.

What are the effects of Pandemic (H1N1) 2009 in Ireland?

In Ireland, the influenza virus has been mild in the vast majority of cases. To date, 22 deaths in confirmed cases of Pandemic (H1N1) 2009 have been reported. More information on numbers infected and hospitalised is available from the [Health Protection Surveillance Centre \(HPSC\) website](#).

Why have we changed our approach to managing the Influenza outbreak?

The Pandemic (H1N1) 2009 virus has spread around the world faster than any previous pandemic. During the initial phase, we focused on slowing the spread of the virus – placing people with flu in isolation at home and asking their close contacts to self-isolate and take anti-viral medicine as a preventative measure. Given the numbers of cases that have now been seen, and the fact that the flu is being passed from person to person within Ireland, we are moving to change how we manage cases of this flu.

From July 16th, like the USA, UK and other EU countries, we have shifted our focus to treatment rather than containment. We are using our resources to ensure that those people who contract the flu can easily access the correct advice to take care of themselves, to stop the flu from spreading to others, and to access medicine or healthcare if they need it. We have moved to a treatment phase.

Treatment

What does the treatment phase involve?

Given that this flu causes mostly mild to moderate illness, we now know that **most people who get it can recover at home without needing anti-viral medicine**. Our clinical advice is that services and treatment can be concentrated mainly on those people with severe symptoms or who are considered at higher risk – like those with long term chronic illness.

How are flu cases diagnosed?

Instead of lab testing all cases, GPs will diagnose people based on their symptoms. We no longer conduct routine contact tracing and giving those contacts preventative anti-viral medicine. We are recommending to GPs that only people with severe symptoms or in high risk groups need to be prescribed antiviral medicine.

Are antiviral drugs effective?

Yes, antiviral drugs are effective in the treatment of Pandemic (H1N1) 2009. If taken shortly after getting sick (within 2 days) they can reduce flu symptoms, shorten the length of the illness and potentially reduce the serious complications of the disease. Ireland has a stockpile of oseltamivir (Tamiflu) and of zanamivir (Relenza). The focus of treatment will now be on those who have severe illness and those with Influenza who are at risk of severe illness

Who will receive anti-viral treatment and where is it available?

- Patients who appear to have severe symptoms
 - Patients who are in defined high risk groups
 - All suspected cases who have a household contact in a very high risk group
- Should a GP prescribe anti-viral treatment, the prescription can be filled at any pharmacy. Anti-viral medicines for this flu are free of charge to all.

Will any contacts of cases require preventative anti-viral therapy?

In general preventative treatment is not recommended for contacts. However in exceptional circumstances doctors may decide to prescribe preventative treatment.

Vaccination

For detailed information on the Swine Flu Vaccination Programme, including locations and times for HSE clinics, visit the HSE website's [vaccination pages](#). [The Irish Medicines Board's website](#) provides detailed information on the vaccines in use.

What is being done regarding Pandemic (H1N1) 2009 vaccination?

Ireland has purchased 7.7million doses of vaccine through two companies – GlaxoSmithKline (Pandemrix) and Baxter (Celvapan). Over the coming months, the HSE will offer a Pandemic Flu vaccine to the entire population. As the vaccine is being delivered in phases, the vaccine will be initially offered to those people who are most at risk of developing complications as a result of developing Swine Flu.

Vaccine is now being delivered to those GPs who have indicated their participation in the programme. A national information campaign commenced on November 2nd, inviting

those in the at-risk groups to make contact with their GP and make an appointment to receive their vaccine at specific clinics. Where a patient's GP is not participating in the programme, the vaccine may be received at a HSE clinic. Once vaccination of this group has been completed, vaccination will commence for other groups, including healthcare workers (to provide protection to their patients), children and older people, before the vaccine is offered to the wider population.

The high risk groups identified are:

- Anyone aged over 6 months and under 65 years who has:
 - Long-term Lung Disease (like Asthma and Cystic Fibrosis)
 - Long-term Heart Disease
 - Long-term Kidney Disease
 - Long-term Liver Disease
 - Long-term Neurological Disease (like MS, Cerebral Palsy)
 - Immunosuppression e.g. cancer treatment (and their household contacts)
 - Haemoglobinopathies
 - Diabetes
 - Obesity
- and pregnant women - from 14 weeks pregnant to 6 weeks after giving birth.

How are we managing the Pandemic (H1N1) 2009 outbreak?

What preparations have been made for an outbreak of Pandemic (H1N1) 2009 in Ireland?

A [national plan for pandemic influenza](#) was put in place in January 2007, describing the health system's response to a possible worldwide pandemic. This detailed plan allowed the Department and HSE to make detailed preparation over the last few years for a pandemic. Stocks of anti-viral medicine and equipment were prepared, and the responses of health services were planned.

What is being done currently to deal with the outbreak in this country?

The Department of Health and Children and the HSE have been working together since April to manage our response to this outbreak. We also link closely with [the European Centres for Disease Control](#), public health officials in other European Member States and the [World Health Organisation](#).

The National Public Health Emergency Team (NPHE) has been meeting since the outbreak was first confirmed. This team managed and directs the Department of Health and Children and the HSE responses to a public health emergency. NPHE is chaired by the Secretary General of the Department of Health and Children.

The Government Interdepartmental Committee has been meeting to deal with health emergency planning involving transport, foreign affairs, education, security, etc.

What other specific measures have been taken?

- An [information leaflet](#) about Pandemic (H1N1) 2009 has been distributed to households
- Posters and leaflets have been placed in air and sea ports

- We have accumulated anti-viral medication stockpiles and distributed sufficient quantities to all community pharmacies to treat people with severe symptoms and those in high risk groups
- Advertising has been placed on TV and other media
- Information is being updated daily on [HSE](#) and Department of Health and Children websites
- Health Professionals have received communications outlining their role in managing cases of influenza.

Are there any plans to close schools or universities?

If a student is suspected of having a virus that might be Pandemic (H1N1) 2009 they must be assessed by their GP/family doctor before returning to school or college. If their GP/family doctor diagnoses the child to have probable or confirmed Pandemic (H1N1) 2009, the local Department of Public Health will be contacted.

The educational institution/school should take advice from the Department of Public Health, but in general the advice will be to continue normal school operations. Unless the Department of Public Health advise the management to close as a precautionary measure, the educational institution/school should not do so.

Personal health protection actions - what YOU can do

Stay Healthy: stop the spread of infection by:

- Avoiding close contact with people who appear unwell and have fever and cough
- Always carrying tissues
- Always covering your nose and mouth with clean tissues, when coughing or sneezing
- Always disposing of used tissues into a bin immediately
- Washing your hands thoroughly with soap and water or alcohol based hand cleaners regularly
- Cleaning surfaces regularly to get rid of germs

What should I do if I get sick?

If you get sick with a flu-like illness phone the **Flu Information Line on Freephone 1800 94 11 00**, available 24 hrs a day.

Listen to the symptoms of flu and the advice on home care. Most people with flu will be able to recover at home within a few days without needing anti-viral medicine or medical care.

If you have severe symptoms, or are in a high risk group, contact your GP/family doctor by telephone. They will decide if you need testing or treatment.

If you do need to be tested or treated the GP may arrange for you to be seen at their surgery or may arrange a home visit. You should stay at home for 7 days while ill unless needing further care.

How do I care for myself or someone else at home?

Stay at home for up to 7 days or until you fully recover.

- Discourage any visitors
- Take medicines such as paracetamol or ibuprofen to reduce the symptoms
- Drink plenty of fluids
- Most people with flu will recover within a few days.

Visit the [HSE website](#) or call the Flu Information Line 1800 94 11 00 to get more advice on home care.

How will I know if I need medical care?

IF YOU ARE AN ADULT

If you have taken the basic care steps outlined above and you start to feel worse, or if after a few days you are not feeling better, you may need more advice from your doctor. Contact your doctor by phone if you notice:

- Shortness of breath at rest or while doing very little
- Painful or difficult breathing
- Coughing up bloody sputum
- Drowsiness, disorientation or confusion
- Fever for 4-5 days and not starting to get better (or getting worse)
- Starting to feel better then developing high fever and feeling unwell again.

IF YOU ARE CARING FOR A CHILD

You should contact your doctor by phone if you have taken the steps above and are still concerned that the child shows any of the following symptoms:

- Fast breathing or trouble breathing
- Bluish skin colour
- Not drinking enough fluids
- Not waking up or not interacting
- Being so irritable that the child does not want to be held
- Flu-like symptoms improve but then return with fever and worse cough

- Fever with a rash.

I am pregnant – what if I get the flu?

Women who are pregnant and develop influenza symptoms should contact their GP by telephone and arrange to have an urgent assessment. Further information for pregnant women is available on the [HPSC](#) website.

I am breastfeeding – what if I get the flu?

Breastfeeding allows important protection and antibodies to be passed from mother to child. Infants who are not breastfeeding are particularly vulnerable to infection and hospitalisation for severe respiratory illness.

Women who are breastfeeding and who get the flu should continue to breastfeed as much as they can to protect their baby. It is safe to breastfeed while taking anti-viral medicine. In as far as is possible, breastfeeding babies should be fed on demand to allow as much protection pass to the baby as possible.

If a mother becomes too ill to feed then expressing milk may still be possible. If the baby becomes too ill to breastfeed, expressed milk should be used. The risk for Pandemic (H1N1) 2009 transmission through breast milk is unknown as yet, but it is rare for normal flu to be transmitted through breast milk from mother to baby.

If a mother is too ill to breastfeed or to express milk, infants should be kept well hydrated and fed with formula.

How long does the virus live on surfaces?

The flu virus can live on a hard surface for up to 24 hours and a soft surface for around 20 minutes.

How easily does this flu spread?

It appears that after a person becomes infected, it takes less than two days for symptoms to start and this is when people are most infectious. Influenza spreads quickly in closed communities such as schools or residential homes.

Do the public need to wear masks if the flu starts to spread widely?

If a caregiver must have close contact with the sick person (for example, to hold a sick infant), spend the least amount of time possible in close contact and wear a facemask when entering the sick room. Avoid being face-to-face with the sick person.

When holding small children who are sick, place their chin on your shoulder so that they will not cough in your face. All persons in the household should clean their hands with soap and water or an alcohol-based hand rub (minimum 60% alcohol) frequently.

Travel advice

This advice will be updated in response to advice from the National Pandemic Influenza Expert Group and the World Health Organisation. Please keep updated by rechecking this advice.

Are there restrictions on travel to any country because of the Pandemic?

No. The WHO says that travel restrictions are not useful in limiting the spread of the virus. Consult the [WHO website](#) for updates.

We recommend that prior to deciding on travel, those from the list below discuss the risk of travel with their health care provider and strongly recommend that they avail of the vaccine through the Swine Flu Vaccination Programme.

Anyone aged over 6 months and under 65 years who has:

- Long-term Lung Disease (like Asthma and Cystic Fibrosis)
- Long-term Heart Disease
- Long-term Kidney Disease
- Long-term Liver Disease
- Long-term Neurological Disease (like MS, Cerebral Palsy)
- Immunosuppression e.g. cancer treatment (and their household contacts)
- Haemoglobinopathies
- Diabetes
- Obesity

and pregnant women - from 14 weeks pregnant to 6 weeks after giving birth.

What precautions should I take when travelling?

We recommend that similar actions to those set out above are followed and in addition

- Familiarise yourself with sources of health advice in the country of travel, and pay attention to local government and public health announcements including any movement restrictions and prevention recommendations.
- Do not travel or fly home if you are ill.
- If you become ill during a flight you should inform the cabin crew.

Precautions for travellers upon return from affected areas:

Travellers returning from affected areas should observe their personal health and if, within 7 days after return, they experience an influenza-like illness like that described above they should stay at home and immediately contact their GP/family doctor.

Further information:

[Health Protection Surveillance Centre \(HPSC\) website.](#)

[Health Service Executive](#)

[World Health Organisation \(WHO\)](#)

[The Centers for Disease Control in the US.](#)

[The European Centres for Disease Control](#)