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Fending Off Swine Flu in the New School Year

by Terry Foody, RN, MSN

Forty-one years have passed since the last global flu epidemic surfaced. In late April 2009 the Swine Flu, H1N1, arrived on the scene when it was detected in Mexico and the United States. Since then, we've watched anxiously as it spread quickly across the global community.

On June 11, United Nations health officials issued a Pandemic Alert when the Swine Flu reached 29,000 cases in 74 countries worldwide. By July 2, there were more than 77,000 laboratory-confirmed cases spread over 100 countries, culminating in 332 deaths. Of these cases, 27,700+ occurred in the U.S., which is more than Mexico (8,700) and Canada (8,000) combined.

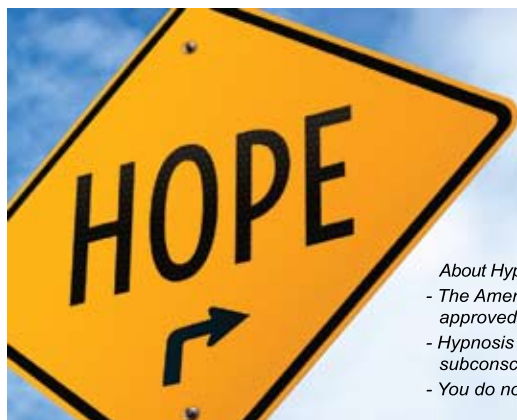
It's difficult to predict the impact of the Swine Flu, also referred to as H1N1, as the school year resumes, but the pandemic could affect our lifestyles in work, school, travel and social gatherings. Children and young adults may be more susceptible due to limited prior flu exposure. Large numbers of people may become sick at the same time in one locale. To respond to this global pandemic and prevent mass illness and avoidable suffering in our community, we must all work together to sharpen our communicable health habits now; protecting ourselves from the Swine Flu is a shared responsibility.

An Ounce of Prevention

Swine Flu is airborne in droplet infection, spread by a cough, sneeze or contaminated surface. It enters the body through the portals of mucous membranes—the eyes, nose, and mouth. You can also catch the disease by touching something that has been contaminated by another's sneeze or hands in the last few hours. Contrary to popular belief, you cannot get Swine Flu by eating pork.

As with all communicable diseases, the chance of infection increases with close contact at home, school, the workplace and places of social gathering. Schools are particularly vulnerable, and teachers, staff and students will need to follow guidelines in order to prevent mass school closings for long periods. Dr. Richard N. Greenberg, Professor of Medicine and Acting Chief in the Division of Infectious Diseases at the University of Kentucky, explains, "The H1N1 S-OIV will be circulating this year. Thus far, it does not appear to be any more dangerous or virulent than the kind of influenza we have experienced in the United States over the past decade. As it will spread easily in youngsters without any prior immunity, it will be very important to utilize vaccination and common sense public health measures to keep the spread of the virus to a minimum and to prevent school closings." Here are some important guidelines to protect yourself and others against the Swine Flu:

- Wash your hands thoroughly and often. Use sanitizing alcohol gels and dispensers.
- Keep your hands away from your eyes, nose and mouth.
- Don't sneeze in your hands! Sneeze in a tissue and discard it, or sneeze into your sleeve inside your elbow.
- Keep commonly used surfaces clean at home, school and work.
- Get the flu shot. When the H1N1 vaccine becomes available, follow the guidelines for inoculation.
- Teach children to stay away from playmates that are sick. Don't go



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- Practice good health habits: Eat a balanced diet, get regular sleep, exercise regularly, and enjoy fresh air.
- Also, in case illness strikes, prepare now: Be sure you have handy some thermometers, tissues, paper towels, hand gels or wipes, a cool mist vaporizer, disinfectant cleansers, your doctor's phone number and clear fluids and broths.

What to Watch For

Swine Flu symptoms include high fever (greater than 100 degrees Fahrenheit or 38 degrees Celsius), sore throat, chills, runny or stuffy nose, cough, fatigue, head and body aches and possibly vomiting and/or diarrhea. Most cases have improved without medical treatment, although if these symptoms surface you may want to contact your health-care provider to confirm the Swine Flu diagnosis and discuss the use of antiviral medicine. If the sick person has a fever that last more than three days, has difficulty breathing and/or blue-tinged lips, is confused or less responsive, or if a flu-sick child has a seizure, call the doctor immediately.

If you or someone you know experiences Swine Flu symptoms, have the sick person stay home for seven days or until the symptoms are gone, and check the Center for Disease Control (CDC) website (www.cdc.gov) for the home care of a sick person, including suggestions for protecting other family members through isolation and the use of masks.

For updates and answers to questions, check out www.cdc.gov and www.who.int or call 1-800-CDC-INFO (1-800-232-4636). The hotline is open 24 hours a day, 7 days a week, and operates in both English and Spanish.

Terry Foody, RN, MSN is an experienced research-based community nurse offering consultations for healthy living and speaking presentations on topics from personal to global health. She can be reached at 859.277.5291, terryfoody@juno.com or www.TerryFoody.com

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