

Dear Colleagues,

Outbreaks of a new strain of influenza A (H1N1) virus of swine origin, reported from Mexico, the United States of America and Canada, are causing widespread concern that we are witnessing the early stages of a pandemic. In addition, Spain reported today, 27 April 2009, the first confirmed case of influenza A (H1N1) outside the Americas, in an individual returning from Mexico.

We do not yet have a complete picture of the epidemiology or the risks, including the level of human-to-human transmission and possible spread beyond the currently affected areas. Nonetheless, in the assessment of WHO, this is a serious situation that must be watched very closely. The situation is unpredictable and evolving quickly. A new disease is, by definition, poorly understood. Any advice WHO provides is based on real-time epidemiological, clinical and laboratory evidence.

We are fortunate to have the International Health Regulations (IHR), adopted in 2005. They are a powerful tool to support us in managing what is clearly a “public health emergency of international concern”, as determined on 25 April 2009 by the WHO Director-General, based on the advice of the Emergency Committee.

After reviewing the available data on the current situation, Committee members identified a number of gaps in knowledge about the clinical features, epidemiology and virology of reported cases, and the appropriate responses. They advised that answers to several specific questions were needed to facilitate their work. These questions are being communicated to the Government of Mexico. The Committee agreed that the current situation constitutes a public health emergency of international concern, and advised that all countries intensify surveillance for unusual outbreaks of influenza-like illness and severe pneumonia.

Current situation

The WHO web site (<http://www.who.int/csr/disease/swineflu/en/index.html>) offers the most up-to-date information.

Numbers are changing rapidly, but, as of midnight Central European Time (CET), 26 April 2009, we have laboratory-confirmed reports of swine influenza A (H1N1) in 20 cases in the United States, 22 cases in Mexico, 4 cases in Canada and 1 case in Spain today. Investigation is continuing to clarify the spread and severity of the disease in Mexico, which has reported suspected clinical cases in 19 of the country’s 32 states. Outbreaks of influenza-like illnesses have also been reported from several other countries, and are under investigation.

Influenza normally affects the very young and the very old, but these age groups have not been heavily affected in Mexico, and the majority of cases have occurred in otherwise healthy young adults. The outbreak in Mexico is of particular concern because of the high case fatality rate in suspected clinical cases.

In several countries in the WHO European Region, individuals are being investigated for swine influenza A (H1N1) infection. As of 12:00 CET today, 27 April 2009, no confirmed cases were reported beyond the one identified in Spain.

Action taken so far

1. Over the last three days, WHO has had intensive consultations with governments, especially those of Mexico and the United States of America. Ministries of health are rapidly scaling up support in several areas, including management of clinical cases, epidemiological and laboratory investigations, pharmaceutical and nonpharmaceutical interventions to control spread, and communications. WHO is supporting investigation and control efforts by deploying a team in Mexico. WHO is also mobilizing additional stocks of oseltamivir for the Government of Mexico.
2. WHO is activating networks of scientists around the world to provide advice and support in disciplines such as clinical medicine, laboratory science and epidemiology. The knowledge generated and shared through these networks will be vital to support countries as the outbreaks spread.
3. In its capacity as WHO IHR Contact Point for States Parties in the European Region, the WHO Regional Office for Europe is closely monitoring the evolution of the spread of swine influenza A (H1N1) with the National IHR Focal Points to ensure early warning.
4. The Regional Office, including through its country offices, is supporting the efforts of its Member States in enhancing their surveillance capacity for the early detection of cases and unusual health events, stressing the importance of activities to raise awareness among clinicians and front-line public health professionals, considering providing advice to travellers from and to areas where cases of swine influenza A (H1N1) have been confirmed, and promoting the adoption of basic hygienic measures at the community level.
5. The Regional Office is making intense efforts to ensure that supplies for laboratory diagnostics are made available to its Member States and that arrangements are in place for the shipment of samples to the WHO reference laboratories for influenza.
6. The WHO Regional Office for Europe is working closely with the Directorate-General for Health and Consumers of the European Commission and the European Centre for Disease Prevention and Control. Similarly, WHO is in close consultation with development partners, United Nations agencies and other international organizations (including those involved in trade and travel), and manufacturers of vaccines, drugs, diagnostic equipment and personal protection equipment.

Next steps

WHO continues to monitor the evolution of the outbreaks, and has put in place appropriate measures, including enhanced surveillance and active monitoring, assessment of the outbreaks' characteristics, and recommendations on medical and nonmedical interventions.

The WHO Regional Office for Europe must assume its full responsibilities as mandated by the IHR. We count on your support and collaboration to meet this rapidly emerging challenge.

Different agencies will bring particular types of support to the response; and my staff will be in contact with their counterparts in other organizations to discuss coordination of our complementary activities. My staff will do their utmost to cater for the needs expressed by the Member States in the WHO European Region in preparing for and responding to this rapidly evolving situation and in compliance with the conclusions of the Emergency Committee, which is meeting today.

The WHO Regional Office of Europe will continue to communicate regularly with its Member States through different channels.

Yours sincerely,

Marc Danzon
WHO Regional Director for Europe