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Swine flu & flu-like illnesses: Information for adults

Introduction

Influenza, or flu, is an infectious disease caused by a virus. Common symptoms include chills, fever, headache, sore throat, muscle aches and pains, cough and exhaustion. Flu is much more severe than the common cold and in serious cases can lead to pneumonia, which can be fatal.

Flu is spread in small droplets of moisture, through the air, by coughing and sneezing. Flu can be caught by breathing in the infection and through contact with infected surfaces. Regular hand washing reduces the risk of infection, especially before preparing or eating food and if you have been in public places where the risk of flu infection is high.

A flu vaccine can reduce the effects of infection. Vaccination is offered to people at high risk of suffering the worst effects of flu, including the elderly, children aged six months to four, and people with diseases such as cancer and diabetes.

Flu is a virus, not a bacteria, so it cannot be treated with antibiotics. Instead, drugs called “antivirals” may be given to people who develop flu, if they are at risk from severe effects.

There are three main types of flu: Influenza A, B and C. In April 2009, one variety nicknamed “swine flu” was discovered in Mexico. Its proper name is Influenza A Subtype H1N1. It has caused a “flu pandemic” because it has spread rapidly. By 8 January 2010, swine flu had caused 360 deaths in the UK but the number of cases continued to fall rapidly. Most of the patients in critical care were children under five. A vaccination programme for

young children is underway and adults with serious conditions, including suppressed immune systems caused by brain tumour treatment, are also entitled to vaccination.

Key NHS messages about swine flu are:

If you have flu-like symptoms and are concerned that you may have swine flu:

- Read up on [swine flu symptoms](#)
- Stay at home and check your condition at the [National Pandemic Flu Service](#) (see below)
- You should call your GP directly if:
 - you have a serious underlying illness
 - you are pregnant
 - you have a sick child under one year old
 - your condition suddenly gets much worse
 - your condition is still getting worse after seven days (or five days for a child)

Note: The National Pandemic Flu Service is a self-care service that will assess your symptoms and, if required, provide an authorisation number which can be used to collect antiviral medication from a local collection point. For those who do not have internet access, the same service can be accessed by telephone on:

- Telephone: 0800 1 513 100
- Minicom: 0800 1 513 200

For more information on the National Pandemic Flu Service go to [Flu Service Q&A](#).

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Avoiding and treating flu

Am I more at risk of getting swine flu and other flu-like illnesses because I have a brain tumour?

No. A brain tumour does not increase the risk of catching swine flu or other flu-like illnesses. However, some treatments for a brain tumour may affect your ability to fight the disease by weakening your immune system. This means if you do catch flu, the illness is more likely to last longer and you may experience more severe effects.

The following treatments can affect your immune system:

- Chemotherapy – drugs taken to control a brain tumour;
- Radiotherapy – one type of radiation treatment called cranio-spinal radiotherapy;
- Steroids – drugs taken to control brain swelling caused by a brain tumour.

Can I have the swine flu vaccine if I have a brain tumour?

A vaccine trains your immune system to fight the disease if you catch swine flu. Two types of swine flu vaccine have been licensed for use in the UK: Pandemrix and Celvapan.

Vaccination for high risk groups of people has now started. **High risk groups include people whose immune system is weakened and those who live with them.** The following vaccination schedule is recommended in the UK:

Pandemrix:

- For all children aged from six months to nine years: - two half doses (0.25ml each) given with a minimum of three weeks between doses.
- For individuals aged 10-59: - one dose (0.5ml) given.
- For individuals aged 60 years and over: - one dose given (this advice will be reviewed when more data become available).
- For individuals aged 10 years and over with weakened immune systems: - two doses (0.5ml each) given with a minimum of three weeks between doses.

Celvapan:

- For children aged from six months and adults: - two doses (0.5ml each) given with a minimum of three weeks between doses.

Can I have the swine flu vaccine if I am receiving chemotherapy or radiotherapy?

Your healthcare team will advise you on the best time to take the vaccine during your treatment. This is because chemotherapy and some radiotherapy can weaken your immune system. If your immune system is weakened, it may be less able to respond to the vaccine. That means that the vaccine may not give you sufficient protection against flu.

Chemotherapy drugs and radiotherapy (doses of radiation) may be given to kill or control a brain tumour. Chemotherapy and cranial-spinal radiotherapy can weaken your immune system. A small number of people affected by brain tumours may receive cranial-spinal radiotherapy.

If I get swine flu, can I take swine flu antivirals (such as Tamiflu) if I have a brain tumour?

Tamiflu is a drug taken to reduce flu symptoms. It is not a cure. You should speak to your healthcare team and see if they recommend taking antivirals.

If I get swine flu, should I take swine flu antivirals (such as Tamiflu) if I am receiving chemotherapy or radiotherapy?

You should speak to your healthcare team and see if they recommend taking Tamiflu.

My brain tumour has made swallowing difficult. Can I still take the antivirals?

Talk to your GP or the hospital where the drugs are prescribed. Antivirals are usually supplied as capsules but can be supplied as a drink that is easier to swallow.

The antivirals are making me sick. I'm worried that I might have vomited up my

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chemotherapy, too. What should I do?

Ask your healthcare team for advice. They may prescribe antiemetic drugs to reduce your vomiting. Or they may suggest stopping the chemotherapy until you have completed the course of antivirals.

The NHS says that I should send a friend without flu to get my antivirals. I have no-one to help me and I cannot drive. What should I do?

Explain your situation to your GP. They should organise a “flu friend” for you. In some cases, your district nurse may help you. Flu friends for vulnerable people provide medication and help with other needs, like shopping.

I need to collect my chemotherapy / steroids from the pharmacy but I have swine flu. What should I do?

If you're receiving chemotherapy or steroids, you should be given the drugs at hospital to take home with you, so they are there if you do develop swine flu. Ensure that you are well-stocked in chemotherapy or steroids so you don't run out.

If you do run out, ask your doctor about a flu friend. In some areas, local pharmacies deliver directly to your door so check with them, too.

Treating your brain tumour when you have flu

Could my brain tumour be made worse by swine flu?

There is no evidence that swine flu or other flu-like illnesses can make your tumour worse. If you have a high grade brain tumour (also called malignant, cancerous and Grade 3 or 4 tumours) your flu symptoms may feel more severe.

I have an appointment tomorrow with my brain tumour healthcare team, but I have swine flu or another flu-like illness. Should I go the appointment?

You should speak to your healthcare team within 24 hours of noticing your symptoms. If the flu is making

you very ill, you may be advised to postpone the appointment and / or the treatment.

Alternatively, your healthcare team may decide to make arrangements to treat you in an isolation room at the hospital to reduce the risk that you might infect other people.

If I am taking chemotherapy but I think I have swine flu or another flu-like illness, what should I do?

If you are taking chemotherapy, **contact your oncology team if you have a one off temperature over 38.5°C or have a temperature over 38°C on two occasions one hour apart. If your temperature is 37°C then you should take it again one hour later to reassess.**

These symptoms may indicate that you have neutropenic sepsis. This can occur when chemotherapy reduces the ability of your bone marrow to produce white blood cells called neutrophils. This can make you more vulnerable to infections in your blood.

In the absence of a fever or high temperature as explained above, contact your healthcare team within 24 hours of noticing your flu symptoms to discuss what to do. You may be advised to delay your chemotherapy treatment if:

- It is a 5 or 20 day course of chemotherapy; or
- It is a chemotherapy, administered through a needle in your arm (intravenously), called vincristine.

If the flu is making you feel very ill, then the chemotherapy may be postponed for a few days until you feel better.

I am having radiotherapy but think I have swine flu or another flu-like illness. What will happen now?

Talk to your radiotherapy support team to discuss your symptoms. If you're coughing and sneezing, you may be advised to stop your radiotherapy for four or five days.

I am due to have surgery but think I have swine flu or another flu-like illness. What will

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happen now?

There are two main types of surgery. Elective surgery is planned in advance so, if you have swine flu, the surgery can be postponed. Emergency surgery is not planned in advance. If you require urgent surgery, the hospital may treat you in a side-room with barrier nursing to ensure others aren't infected when your surgery is over.

I take anti-epilepsy drugs. Will swine flu antivirals react with these drugs?

There is no evidence that swine flu antivirals react with epilepsy medication.

I have swine flu and am unable to look after my loved one who has a brain tumour and needs 24 hour care. Where can I get help?

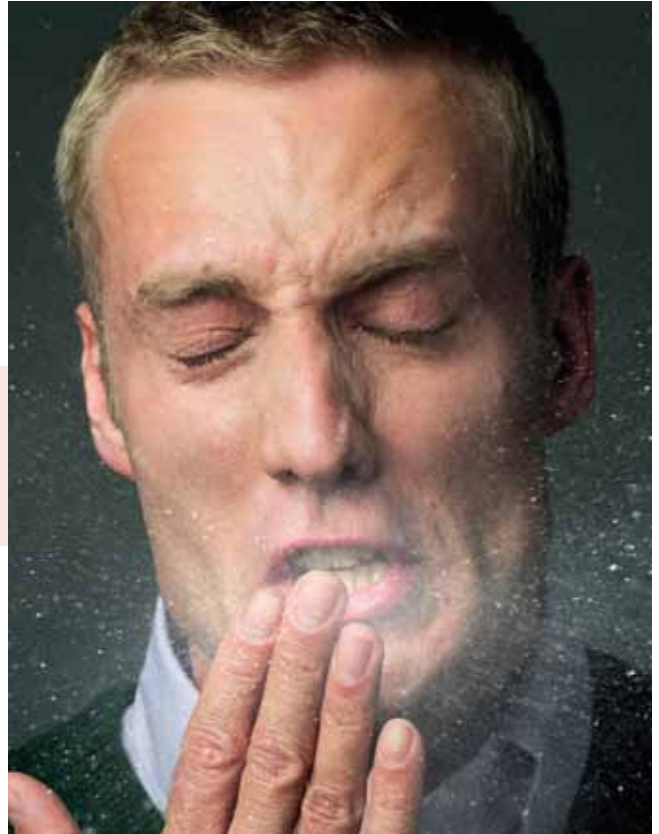
Start by talking to your GP or district nurse. Your local healthcare trust should be able to organize care support for you at home or may offer to care for your loved one in hospital until you recover. You may be referred to your local social services for support.

Some local hospices offer respite care, but bear in mind that they are limited in the number of beds. Contact them in advance to see what they can do.

We value your feedback

We hope that you have found this information useful. If you have further questions that need an answer or wish to make any other comments on this support information, please:

- Email: support@braintumouruk.org.uk
- Phone: 0845 4500 386



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