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# Swine flu & flu-like illnesses: Information for parents

## 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

Is my child more at risk of getting swine flu or other flu-like illnesses because s/he has a brain tumour?

No. A brain tumour does not increase the risk of catching swine flu or other flu-like illnesses. However, the immune system that defends your child against infections is not as well-developed as the immune system in an adult.

In addition, some treatments for a brain tumour may affect your child's ability to fight the disease by weakening their immune system. This means if they do catch flu, the illness may last longer with more severe effects.

Your child may experience more severe flu if s/he:

- is currently on chemotherapy or has finished a course within the last six months;
- has finished a course of high-dose chemotherapy within the last 12 months;
- has finished a 3 day or more course of the steroid dexamethasone within the last two months;
- is receiving cranio-spinal radiotherapy;
- is receiving a combination of chemotherapy and radiotherapy. More than half of brain tumour patients experience this combination therapy.

Can my child have the swine flu vaccine if s/he has a brain tumour?

Yes. A vaccine trains your child's immune system to fight the disease if they 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 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 my child have the swine flu vaccine if s/he is receiving chemotherapy or radiotherapy?

Discuss the best time to give the vaccine to your child with the oncologist or radiotherapist in their healthcare team. Your child's brain tumour treatment may weaken their immune system and make the vaccine less effective. Your healthcare team may suggest delaying treatment until the vaccine has been given.

If my child gets swine flu, should s/he take swine flu antivirals (such as Tamiflu) if s/he has a brain tumour?

There is some evidence that children suffer more side effects from antivirals (such as vomiting and diarrhoea) than adults. Contact your healthcare team for advice about your child.

If my child gets swine flu, should I take swine flu antivirals (such as Tamiflu) if s/he is receiving chemotherapy or radiotherapy?

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

My child's brain tumour has made swallowing difficult and s/he needs to take antivirals to treat swine flu. What should be done?

Antivirals such as Tamiflu are usually administered as capsules, but can be ground up and dissolved in a drink or provided as a drink for those who have difficulty in swallowing. Ask your healthcare team for advice.

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Antivirals (such as Tamiflu) are making my child sick and I am worried that s/he has vomited up the chemotherapy. What should I do?

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

The NHS says that I should send a friend to get my child's antivirals because my child and I have swine flu. 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 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

Can swine flu and other flu-like illnesses make my child's tumour worse?

There is no evidence that swine flu or other flu-like illnesses will make your child's tumour worse.

My child has an appointment tomorrow with their brain tumour healthcare team tomorrow, but s/he has swine flu. Should s/he go to the appointment?

Talk to your healthcare team and describe your child's symptoms. Your child's GP or district nurse should also be contacted for advice. If the swine flu is

making your child really ill, the appointment should be postponed until his/her condition improves. Your healthcare team may recommend treatment to help your child cope with the flu.

My child is due to have surgery, but I think s/he has swine flu or another flu-like illness. What should I do?

Talk to your healthcare team and describe your child's symptoms. Your child's GP or district nurse should also be contacted for advice. If the swine flu is making your child really ill, scheduled (elective) surgery may be postponed until his/her condition improves. If your child's tumour is growing and exerting painful pressure, you may be advised to proceed with surgery even if your child has swine flu. The hospital will isolate your child and use barrier nursing to minimize the risk of other people being infected.

If my child is taking chemotherapy but I think s/he has swine flu or another flu-like illness, what should I do?

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

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

In the absence of a fever or high temperature as explained above, contact your child's healthcare team within 24 hours of noticing their flu symptoms to discuss what to do.

Children taking chemotherapy have regular blood tests and your healthcare team may detect swine flu in your child's bloodstream before you notice any symptoms. If your child is really unwell from swine flu, your healthcare team may advise you to safely postpone the chemotherapy until your child is better. Swine flu usually lasts no more than a few days.

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My child is having radiotherapy but I think s/he has swine flu or another flu-like illness. What will happen?

If your child is really unwell from swine flu, your healthcare team may advise you to safely postpone the radiotherapy until your child is better.

My child takes 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 child 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 for children, 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](mailto:support@braintumouruk.org.uk)
- Phone: 0845 4500 386



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