

What you need to do if you develop Influenza-like symptoms

H1N1 (Swine Flu) has been less severe than first expected but to prevent the disease from spreading, the Barwon Division of General Practice is urging people in the region to familiarise themselves with procedures for what to do if they experience symptoms of influenza.

Chair of the Barwon Division of General Practice, Gunnedah GP Dr Grahame Deane, participated in a teleconference with the Hunter New England H1N1 Taskforce last night, and was briefed about the current status of the pandemic situation.

"14,000 Australians have so far been diagnosed with H1N1, but this is an underestimation of the true figure", Dr Deane said.

"As of last night there have been 37 deaths from the disease in Australia, 14 of those were in NSW and 2 in the Hunter New England area.

"80% of all people who currently have H1N1 are aged between 20 and 50 however, 71% of people with the illness have an underlying medical condition such as a respiratory illness, renal disease or are pregnant".

Dr Deane said procedures for what to do if a person develops influenza like symptoms (fever, cough, sore throat, fatigue) depend upon such factors as the severity of the symptoms and underlying conditions.

People with Influenza-like symptoms have been grouped into four categories. Below is an outline of the procedures for accessing treatment for each of the four groups.

1) People who are usually well who have influenza-like symptoms such as fever, cough, sore throat and fatigue.

These people should stay home from work or school and treat their illness as they would if they had any other seasonal flu. In most cases H1N1 is not at all severe and people infected recover from it relatively quickly without taking anti-virals such as Tamiflu.

They should practise good hygiene such as coughing and sneezing into tissues which are promptly thrown away and washing hands regularly with soap and water or an alcohol-based hand rub. They should also limit their contact with others.

People in this group do not need to go to the doctor or hospital emergency department and do not need to take Tamiflu. If their symptoms become significantly worse, they should contact their doctor by telephone and seek advice.

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2) People with influenza like symptoms with co-morbidities.

Co-morbidities are underlying medical conditions such as a respiratory illness or renal disease. Women who are pregnant and Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islanders also fall within this category.

These people have a higher risk of developing a severe form of H1N1.

If they develop influenza-like symptoms they should contact their doctor by telephone and describe their symptoms to staff. They may then be asked to come into the surgery for assessment.

Each surgery will have a slightly different procedure for assessing and treating possible cases of H1N1. A surgical mask may be provided upon entry to the surgery which the patient will be asked to wear while waiting for the doctor. In some surgeries there may be a separate room in which people with possible cases of Swine Flu may be asked to wait.

It is important that people within this category are assessed by a doctor as soon as possible after they develop symptoms, ideally within 72 hours.

Once the patient has been assessed, the doctor will prescribe and administer Tamiflu at no cost to the patient. Most surgeries in the area have a supply of Tamiflu. The dosage for Tamiflu is 1 tablet twice a day for five days. There are also forms of the drug for children.

3) People who have severe influenza-like symptoms who need hospitalisation

There are currently 230 people in hospital with H1N1 in Australia and 96 are in intensive care. Four of these cases are in the Hunter New England area.

Most of the people who are hospitalised with Swine Flu have co-morbidities, but some are young people who have developed symptoms such as severe respiratory difficulties.

People who are experiencing severe symptoms should contact their doctor immediately by phone for advice.

Once a patient has been admitted to hospital, a swab will be taken to determine whether they have H1N1. This is the only group who will have swabs taken routinely.

4) People who have contact with someone who has a proven case of H1N1

People who have had contact with someone who has a confirmed positive case of H1N1, do not need to isolate themselves if they are feeling well.

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If however, they develop influenza-like symptoms, they should stay at home until they have recovered or seek appropriate medical advice as described above if they have a co-morbidity or their symptoms become severe.

Dr Grahame Deane said that while it was important for people to be vigilant about stopping the spread of the disease, H1N1 was not posing a huge threat to people in this area as yet.

“There have not been an overwhelming number of cases this side of the Great Dividing Range”, Dr Deane said.

“However, with the end of the school holidays approaching and people coming back to the area from their travels, we may see a rise in the number of cases over the next two months”.

The Federal Government has set up a Swine Flu hotline for members of the public with enquiries about Swine Flu: 1802007.

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