

Swine Flu – Your questions answered

PiA has received a number of questions from patients about the current worldwide outbreak of Swine Flu and how this might affect PID patients. Similar questions have been asked in a number of PID clinics around the UK. We have taken the most often asked of these questions and incorporated them into a question and answer format below, which has been compiled, reviewed and approved by the PiA Medical Advisory Panel under the Chairmanship of Dr. Aarn Huissoon. We hope this helps answer some of your more immediate questions and concerns.

Naturally the situation is evolving on a day-to-day basis and as events unfold there may be other questions that arise and need a response. You may also have additional questions that are not answered below. Please let us know if you would like a question answered by emailing kate@pia.org.uk and we will update this advice on a regular basis.

For more general background about Swine Flu and the current epidemic we have also included links to a number of websites that you might find useful.

Should I contact my Immunodeficiency Centre if I develop flu symptoms?

Flu should be diagnosed and treated by GPs in the community, and flu treatment for outpatients is not usually available in hospital. While your Immunodeficiency Centre may be able to give advice, they are unlikely to be able to give any treatment for uncomplicated flu.

If I haven't had the flu vaccine should I now have it and is it safe for me?

People with PID are entitled to have the annual flu vaccine, and should have this routinely. If you haven't had a dose in the last year then you should have one now if you can get it. However supplies may not be readily available at this time of year.

The routine annual flu vaccine is a killed vaccine, so it is safe for people with PID to have it. It might not work as well if you have PID, but this is hard to predict, and it may give some protection.

Should my family members also have the flu vaccine?

Because the flu vaccine is not always effective in people with PID, it is important to protect them from catching flu in other ways as well. One of the ways you can do this is to vaccinate their immediate family, so that they are less likely to catch flu from them at home.

How does this vaccine help in the current situation?

The Mexican Swine flu virus is an influenza A virus, and the annual flu vaccine contains influenza A proteins. Having some previous immunity to these proteins through vaccination may help protect against the Swine flu virus. However the Swine flu virus is substantially different to the recent vaccine viruses (that is how viruses evolve to cause pandemics), so the current vaccine does not offer total protection, and may not offer any.

If I have the flu vaccine and then go on to develop flu-like symptoms how do I know that it is from the vaccine and not the Mexican Swine Flu?

The vaccine cannot cause flu. Some people get mild reactions to the vaccine, either at the injection site, or feeling unwell with a low-grade fever. These symptoms should respond well to simple treatment like paracetamol or ibuprofen. Real flu is much more severe, with cough, sneezing, aches and pains, sore throat, fever >38°C. If in doubt contact your GP or NHS Direct.

Should I be having more immunoglobulin?

Like the flu vaccine, immunoglobulin may provide a small amount of protection against Swine flu. Your immunoglobulin dose should be being monitored by your immunology team, and they will know if your levels are adequate. There is no known benefit from increasing the dose.

What should I do if I find out I have been in contact with someone who goes on to develop Mexican Swine flu?

People who have flu are most infectious when they start sneezing or coughing, and usually have a fever, but can be infectious for a day or so before they get any symptoms. Contacts who catch flu from them will develop symptoms within 2-3 days. Contacts of known flu cases are being given anti-viral drugs through their local Health Protection Units, usually via the GP.

Should I or my family be avoiding crowded places?

This is not thought to be necessary at the moment, although if you can avoid crowded places without impacting unduly on the quality of your life it might be wise to do so. This advice may change as the scale of the epidemic becomes apparent.

How can we make sure the medication will be available to us – will PID patients have any priority?

Tamiflu and Relenza are anti-viral drugs used to treat flu. They are useful if taken within 48 hours of the start of symptoms. Stocks of these drugs are not held in hospitals. They are distributed through the local Health Protection Units, in liaison with Primary Care Trusts.

The current advice from the Health Protection Agency is that PID patients will be treated the same as everyone else, although representation is being made by PiA on behalf of PID patients for prioritisation in the event of a pandemic.

Can Tamiflu and Relenza be used as a preventative?

Yes they can. Some people who have come into contact with diagnosed flu cases have been given these drugs to stop flu developing. This is being organised through GPs and Health Protection Units locally.

If you are not already taking prophylactic antibiotics should you do so?

If you have chest problems (e.g. bronchiectasis) as a result of your immunodeficiency, then it is recommended that you take a course of antibiotics if you get flu (in addition to Tamiflu or Relenza, if you are given these). Antibiotics are not effective against flu, but they help to prevent complications such as chest infections. If you keep a course of antibiotics at home to treat chest infections yourself then you should take this if are diagnosed with flu.

Useful links to websites providing comprehensive general background and information on Swine Flu:

Health Protection Agency:

www.hpa.org.uk

Department of Health:

www.dh.gov.uk

National Health Service:

www.nhs.uk

NHS Direct:

www.nhsdirect.nhs.uk

World Health Organisation:

www.who.int/en/

Foreign & Commonwealth Office (travel):

www.fco.gov.uk/en/travelling-and-living-overseas/swine-flu