



**Australian Rheumatology Association
Advice for Rheumatology Patients concerning
Human Swine Flu (H1N1 Influenza 09)**

Rheumatology patients are advised to follow general government recommendations regarding human swine flu. This can be located at the National Pandemic Flu Service Department of Health and Ageing via the website:

<http://www.flupandemic.gov.au/internet/panflu/publishing.nsf/Content/where-help-1>

or phone - public information hotline **1800 004 599**.

Human swine flu (H1N1 Influenza 09) is a new and different strain of flu. Most people do not have any pre-existing immunity to human swine flu. It is not clear if the current flu vaccinations protect against it.

Symptoms are similar to normal flu. They may include sudden fever (38°C), cough, headache, chills, muscle and joint pain, sore throat and runny nose, and sometimes loss of appetite, vomiting and diarrhoea.

Human swine flu is contagious and spreads from one person to another. Being in close contact with an infected person while they are talking, coughing or sneezing puts you at risk. The virus may also spread through hand contact with an infected person or contaminated objects and surfaces. In general you should not change your daily activities to avoid exposure to swine flu. If you know that someone has symptoms of swine flu then it would be sensible to avoid this person, if possible, while they have symptoms.

If you are exposed to someone who has symptoms of swine flu and you catch it, symptoms develop within 2-7 days of exposure. If you develop symptoms of swine flu you should follow national swine flu guidance. If you are sick in the first instance try to contact your local doctor or hospital **by phone** rather than in person. This will help reduce the spread of infection.

In addition to this general advice, if you are taking a medicine for any rheumatological disease please read the information below.

- **If you are taking corticosteroids** (steroids) such as prednisolone or prednisone symptoms of swine flu may be less obvious. If you feel unwell and think you may have swine flu contact your doctor even if your symptoms are not as severe as other peoples. **DO NOT stop the corticosteroids.**
- **If you are taking biologic therapies** (e.g. adalimumab, abatacept, anakinra, etanercept, infliximab, rituximab or tocilizumab) or **cyclophosphamide** symptoms may also be less obvious. If you feel unwell and think you may have swine flu, contact your doctor even if your symptoms are not as severe as other peoples. **If you have been in direct contact** with someone who has definite swine flu at a time when they had symptoms, **stop your treatment for 7 days**. If you have not developed symptoms of swine flu after 7 days you can restart treatment.

- **If you are taking azathioprine, cyclosporin, gold, hydroxychloroquine, leflunomide, methotrexate, mycophenolate, penicillamine, sulfasalazine** and have been in direct contact with someone who has definite swine flu at a time when they had symptoms, you should stop your treatment for 7 days. If you have not developed symptoms of swine flu after 7 days you can restart treatment.

Individual patients may require different recommendations. If your rheumatologist has specifically recommended you continue your treatment follow their advice. Advice should be sought from your rheumatologist if a longer period without medication is suggested. Most people are fine within a week.

If you develop symptoms of swine flu you should contact your doctor or national swine flu advice line and consider treatment as recommended (see website and telephone information).

- **If you are taking a biologic therapy, cyclophosphamide, methotrexate, azathioprine, cyclosporin, hydroxychloroquine, mycophenolate, gold, leflunomide or sulfasalazine** stop your treatment until the symptoms of swine flu have gone away completely. You can then restart your treatment. Most people are fine within a week. **Advice should be sought from your rheumatologist if a longer period without medication is suggested.**
- **If you are taking corticosteroids** (e.g. prednisolone) **do not stop**. If you are unwell, the dose may need to be increased. Please discuss with your doctor.

If your symptoms are very severe or you feel very unwell it is important to seek advice from your doctor or nearest hospital department. Your disease and the medicines you take may increase your risk of developing a bacterial infection that requires antibiotics.

The swine flu vaccination is now available in Australia. Your local doctor will be running a vaccination programme. It is suggested you receive this vaccination. You should have the usual seasonal flu vaccination as recommended.

**Therapeutics Committee
Australian Rheumatology Association**

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