

Influenza A(H1N1) (aka Swine flu)

What flight attendants need to know

Updated April 30, 2009

What is it?

Swine flu is a viral infection that is typically only passed between pigs. A newly-identified A strain (H1N1) of this virus is reported to pass from person to person. The first cases were reported in Mexico, and, at the time of this writing, cases have now been confirmed in the US, Austria, Canada, Germany, Israel, Netherlands, New Zealand, Spain, Switzerland and the United Kingdom. It is likely that it will continue to spread rapidly with global travel.

Is it fatal?

Some experts have suggested that this flu strain is highly transmissible but not as serious as avian flu, for example. It may be too early to know. To date, seven confirmed fatalities have been reported in Mexico and one confirmed fatality in the US, but not elsewhere.

How do I know if I am infected?

Symptoms of infection include fever greater than 100.4°F [$>38.0^{\circ}\text{C}$], cough, sore throat, body aches, headache, chills and fatigue. Diarrhea and vomiting have also been associated with swine flu. If you develop these symptoms, immediately contact your primary care physician or an infectious disease specialist, and seek emergency care if needed. If you would like further information or assistance, contact your AFA Employee Assistance Program representative.

How can I protect myself?

Some countries have issued travel advisories, recommending that citizens not visit affected areas of the US, Mexico, and other countries. The US has recommended against non-essential travel to Mexico. The protective measures outlined in this bulletin are especially important for our members who are based in affected areas, must work on flights to or from affected areas, or must work on flights connecting to those areas.

Wherever you fly, wash your hands frequently with soap and water or alcohol-based gels, particularly before eating and serving food and drinks. Avoid touching your eyes, nose, and mouth. (Germs spread that way.)

If you have cuts or open sores on your hands, you should wear gloves. This will prevent you from getting infected. However, you must still remember to not touch your face when wearing gloves and to wash your hands after you take your gloves off. If your gloves get torn, remove the old gloves, wash your hands, and put on a new pair.

If passengers or crew cough or sneeze while onboard, they should do so into their elbow or shoulder and wash their hands afterwards.

If you observe that a passenger has flu-like symptoms, encourage them to wear a face mask* if available and isolate them from other passengers, to the extent possible. When you are in contact with a potentially-infected passenger, AFA recommends that you wear a face mask* and gloves. AFA is urging the airlines and the FAA to require that such protective equipment be provided.

If you are pregnant, you are at increased risk of influenza-related complications and your immunity can be suppressed. It is especially important for you to avoid exposure.

Avoid close contact with people and with potentially infected surfaces, to the extent possible.

Encourage your airline and pilots to turn up the air packs to "high" whenever possible, especially during ground operations when risk of infection is highest because people are active and in closer contact with each other when stowing bags. Maximizing the airflow to the cabin can reduce your risk of exposure to airborne viruses.

The US Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) recommends that you stay home if you have flu-like symptoms, especially if you live in an area where swine flu infections have been reported. This is to protect you and to control the spread of disease. AFA is writing to its member airlines and the FAA to urge them to suspend airline policies that discourage flight attendants from calling in sick in light of this CDC recommendation and emerging pandemic.

What else is AFA doing?

In response to the US Health and Human Services declaration that Swine Influenza has created a public health emergency nationwide, AFA has formally requested that the Federal Aviation Administration issue an emergency order requiring the airlines to:

1. Provide non-latex gloves and appropriate masks* to flight attendants, at least on trips to, from, and within areas that are at increased risk. Allow flight attendants to choose whether or not they wear these gloves/masks. At the very least, allow flight attendants to wear their own gloves/masks, without discipline;
2. Ensure that aircraft are equipped with proper and sufficient hand washing materials, and emphasize the importance of regular and thorough hand washing, and not touching one's face, to crew and passengers; and
3. Develop, implement, and enforce passenger-screening as recommended by the WHO, CDC, or the relevant national health officials; and
4. Tell flight attendants what steps to take if a passenger shows symptoms.

For updated information, visit the CDC online at www.cdc.gov/swineflu/ and the World Health Organization via www.who.int/en/

* A surgical mask will provide limited protection, but is better than nothing. With the SARS epidemic, the CDC recommended that people with symptoms wear an N95 disposable respirator, which provides better protection because less air leaks out around the face. The US National Institute for Occupational Safety and Health (NIOSH) has published standards for respirator masks, N/R/P 95/99/100; these are summarized at <http://www.cdc.gov/niosh/respsumm.html>. The European Union has two published standards, CE EN149:2001 (FFP 2/3) or EN143:2000 (P2), which are summarized in a document from a UK safety equipment distributor, http://www.sba.co.uk/content/doc_11.pdf. Masks should conform to these or comparable national/regional standards.