

Aporkalypse?

Guidelines for the Swine and Seasonal Flu

By Susan Judah, ND

Could you be more miserable? The runny nose. The aching muscles. The pounding head. The cold and flu season is here again. But don't take it lying down. Get on your feet with natural therapies and make your body's own immune system do a better job at recovering from (and preventing) the flu.

Each year millions of people contract influenza and other flu-like infections. Colds and flu are caused by viruses and a decrease in immunity that allows the viruses to take hold. Infection usually starts with sinus congestion, a runny nose, sneezing, and perhaps a sore throat, headache, and fatigue. Viruses cannot be killed by antibiotics. The only way to beat these bugs is to reduce viral exposure (wash your hands) to prevent infection or, if already infected, to motivate the body's own immune system to clean house. Fortunately, natural medicines are great at facilitating this process while reducing uncomfortable aches, congestion, cough, and fever. Most patients recover in 1 to 2 weeks.

This year a new more concerning variant of the flu virus arrived. The H1N1 swine flu frightened public health officials after a dozen deaths were reported in Mexico. After careful observation this spring, Health and Human Services Secretary Kathleen Sebelius said "what we are seeing looks very much like seasonal flu so far." We will see another round of swine flu this fall. Most people suffer unpleasant but not life-threatening symptoms, such as fever, body aches, sore throat and a runny nose. Vomiting and diarrhea, which are normally rare in adults with the flu, occur in about 50% of people with the swine flu. More serious symptoms that warrant a call to your doctor include trouble breathing, chest or abdominal pain, a high fever (101° in adults and 103° in children), persistent vomiting or diarrhea (more than 3 days), or a relapse of flu symptoms after apparent recovery.

Although many people will be exposed to the swine flu this fall, there are a few groups who are at higher risk. Pregnant women and people with asthma, diabetes, heart disease and other chronic diseases are more likely to develop serious illness. The Centers for Disease Control (CDC) found that pregnant women are four times more likely to be hospitalized with the swine flu. In the US, 70% of those hospitalized and 80% of those who have died had underlying medical conditions that compromised their recovery. Young people are another group at higher risk of contracting the swine flu and potential complications. Most individuals who died ranged in age from 25 to 64 years old. This is unusual for the flu, which typically causes more problems for the elderly. CDC officials say people 60 years of age and older may have some immunity to the new virus from exposure to similar flu viruses that circulated between 1918 and 1957.

So, the big bad flu is on the way. What can we do to protect ourselves? Frequent handwashing with soap and water is the first step. Colds and flu are transmitted by contact with infected people and the objects that infected people touch. Proper hygiene reduces your exposure to the virus. The second step in prevention is to eat a health promoting diet rich in vegetables and fruits. Avoid sugar and refined foods that suppress the immune system. Limit dairy and other food sensitivities that increase mucus production and stress the body. Drink lots of water to hydrate the respiratory system and enhance detoxification pathways. The third step to encourage health is to get sufficient rest and daily physical activity. Sleep and exercise are potent stimulators of the immune system.

Vaccines are produced each year to prevent the seasonal flu. A separate vaccine specific for the swine flu is now under development and is expected to be released in October. Clinical trials are being conducted now to determine the efficacy and safety of the new vaccine. The CDC is recommending the swine flu vaccine for pregnant women, infant caregivers, individuals 6 months of age to 24 years of age, individuals

up to 65 years of age with chronic disease, health care workers, and emergency medical service providers. The vaccine is not being recommended for those at low risk of contracting the swine flu or those at low risk for complications.

If you or your loved ones contract the seasonal or swine flu, stay home and stay away from others for at least 24 hours after your fever is gone. We counsel our patients to continue the preventative measures mentioned previously while adding in nutrient and herbal medicines to strengthen the immune system. Vitamin C, vitamin A, zinc, and anti-viral herbs such as echinacea, astragalus, lomatium, Chinese mushroom, and thyme are very useful. Consult with your physician to determine which supplement is right for you. We also recommend various hydrotherapy techniques to encourage quick and thorough resolution of symptoms. Herbal baths, herbal steams, chest rubs, and humidifiers are soothing and decongesting.

Antibiotics do not shorten a cold or flu, reduce the severity, or prevent secondary complications because the cause of illness is viral and not bacterial. Two antiviral medications (Tamiflu and Relenza) are available and may shorten the severity and duration of the seasonal and swine flu. The CDC doesn't recommend the use of these medications in mild swine flu illness due to the likelihood of creating viruses that are resistant to drugs. The use of pharmaceuticals may be considered for severe cases or pregnant women who are at high risk of complications from the swine flu.

So what's the bottom line? The swine flu is not the end of the world. It is however another good reason to make lifestyle changes that promote health. And if you do get sick, stay home and use natural therapies to feel better and recover faster. As with most health problems, there is no "magic bullet" or curative pill ... just common sense.