

9.9.2009

## **Good to know about influenza and swine flu**

Influenza refers to an infection of the respiratory tract caused by the influenza A and B viruses. The so-called seasonal influenza typically reaches Finland between December and March, and the epidemic lasts for 6 to 8 weeks. A considerable number of those of working age catch influenza each year, as the viruses that cause it are able to continuously change their form.

Influenza is transmitted through the air. It can be contracted when a sick person coughs or sneezes or, for example, touches a dirty door handle. It is difficult to avoid infection, as a person with the virus sheds it even before they develop symptoms. The risk of infection can be decreased by ensuring good hand hygiene and avoiding touching the face (nose, eyes, mouth) with hands.

The incubation time for influenza is usually 2 to 3 days. The continued symptoms of the disease, usually lasting for 3 to 6 days, include fever (commonly over 38°C [100°F]), chills, fatigue, coughing, sore throat, rhinitis, joint pain, and headache. If the symptoms seem severe, you should consult your occupational healthcare nurse or doctor.

A patient with influenza typically requires 3 to 6 days of sick leave. Check the sick leave policy with your employer. Many employers accept absence by one's own notification, especially during the epidemic season.

Pneumonia is a common complication of influenza.

### **Seasonal influenza vaccines**

Vaccination is the most important way of preventing the yearly so-called seasonal influenza. The influenza vaccines intended for preventing the seasonal influenza of late 2009 and early 2010 are now available at Terveystalo's units.

The World Health Organization (WHO) yearly determines the virus strains used in the influenza vaccine to match the expected influenza virus types that cause epidemics.

The protection given by each seasonal influenza vaccination lasts approximately one year. Thus, the vaccine should be taken each year both due to the short duration of the protection and the variety in the formulation of the vaccine. The vaccines do not contain live or complete viruses. Therefore, the vaccine does not cause influenza.

### **Swine flu**

The so-called swine flu caused by the A(H1N1) virus has been found to be similar in severity to the ordinary seasonal influenza. Sudden onset of high fever is a typical symptom. In addition, sore throat, dry cough, stuffy nose, headache, and muscle pain commonly occur. The fever usually begins to subside on the third day after the onset of symptoms and returns to normal within 3 to 6 days. Respiratory symptoms may increase and last for up to two weeks after the fever has already disappeared.

Patients with mild symptoms who are not in a high-risk group do not need to be diagnosed by a doctor or have special medicinal treatment. The fever can be reduced by over-the-counter paracetamol (acetaminophen) or ibuprofen drugs. Sufficient intake of fluids is important to a patient with fever.

Those in a high-risk group for swine flu include those who use a regular combination of drug therapies, those with chronic liver or kidney impairment, an immunosuppressive disease or on medication for it, chronic neurological diseases, the morbidly obese, and pregnant women.

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If you suspect that you are suffering from swine flu, rest at home and avoid unnecessary contact with other people. When sneezing and coughing, cover your mouth with a disposable handkerchief. Dispose of the used handkerchief. If you do not have disposable handkerchiefs, cough or sneeze on the upper part of your sleeve. After sneezing and blowing your nose, wash your hands with soap and water or clean them with an alcohol-based hand disinfectant or a towel.

You should seek medical advice if you are in a high-risk group for influenza (see above), the symptoms are strong, the high fever lasts for more than a week, your chest hurts, or you feel weak or exceptionally tired. These symptoms could refer to pneumonia or myocarditis.

A patient with swine flu typically requires 3 to 6 days of sick leave. Check the sick leave policy with your employer. Many employers accept absence by one's own notification, especially during the epidemic season.

### **Swine flu vaccine**

Testing of the A(H1N1)v vaccine began in August at the University of Tampere's Vaccine Research Center, and the first batch (250,000 doses) of the A(H1N1) vaccine supplied to Finland by the pharmaceutical company GSK is expected to arrive in September.

## **INSTRUCTIONS**

### **You can decrease the risk of catching influenza when you are healthy by:**

- Keeping your hands clean. Wash your hands with water and soap or clean them with an alcohol-based hand disinfectant or a towel.
- Not touching your eyes, nose, or mouth unless you have just washed your hands.
- Not going near a sick person.

### **You can prevent the spreading of influenza when you are ill by:**

- Covering your mouth and nose with a disposable handkerchief when you cough or sneeze. Dispose of the used handkerchief immediately.
- If you do not have a handkerchief, cough or sneeze on the upper part of your sleeve, not your hands.
- Washing your hands with water and soap or cleaning them with an alcohol-based hand disinfectant or a towel after sneezing and blowing your nose.
- Not going to work, school or running errands while ill. This way, you will prevent others from being infected.

Monitor your condition and contact a doctor by telephone if necessary. If the symptoms are mild and you are generally healthy, home care and following general influenza treatment guidelines will suffice.

*Source and additional information: National Institute for Health and Welfare, [www.thl.fi](http://www.thl.fi)*

Terveystalo will continuously monitor the development of the influenza situation. We will update our instructions as necessary.

Updated information is also available on our Web site at [www.terveystalo.com/influenssa](http://www.terveystalo.com/influenssa) (in Finnish).

SUOMEN TERVEYSTALO OY