



Dear Editor,

April 29, 2009

For most Americans, “swine flu” was a little known disease until this week. Now, with the outbreak classified as a possible pandemic, swine flu is suddenly top of mind.

As a pathologist, I diagnose diseases, including swine flu, through medical laboratory tests and know that many Americans probably have questions regarding this new virus and how it affects them and their families.

What exactly is swine flu? Many animals, like swine, get influenza just like humans. People who have close contact with these animals may contract the animal-version of influenza. Normally, this is not easily transmitted human-to-human. What is concerning about this particular strain is that it is now spreading human-to-human more easily.

Although the swine flu strain of influenza that is currently under investigation is not covered by the most recent seasonal flu vaccine for humans, it is, fortunately, responding to two of the newer antiviral medications.

You can protect yourself and your family against the swine flu, as well as the seasonal flu, by avoiding contact with infected individuals and washing your hands frequently with soap and water— particularly when in public places. You should also avoid hand-to-eye, nose and mouth contact prior to washing your hands. Eating properly cooked pork is safe; swine flu is not transmitted in this manner.

To avoid spreading influenza should you contract it, you should cover your mouth with a tissue when you cough and dispose of the tissue promptly. In addition, you should stay home from school or work. If you develop flu-like symptoms, such as fever, cough, and weakness, you should seek medical attention, as therapy is most effective when started promptly.

Fortunately, we live in a country with an excellent public health system; current information regarding swine flu and other important diseases is updated regularly at the Center for Disease Control and Prevention’s website www.cdc.gov .

Sincerely,

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