

ADVICE TO UNISON MEMBERS ON SWINE FLU



Cases of swine flu (H1N1) are on the increase and the government recently took the decision to move from containment of the illness to treatment. GPs will now be diagnosing the condition based on symptoms that patients experience rather than a laboratory test.

Increased cases of swine flu will put the NHS under increasing pressure, as is already the case in some areas. However it is in the autumn and winter months when we anticipate a second and possible third wave of the illness.

UNISON has developed this guidance specifically for members to highlight the key issues you should be aware of.

What should I do if I think that I have swine flu?

- If you suspect you have swine flu **you should not attend work**. Follow your employer's sickness absence policy;
- **Do not attend your GP surgery** if you suspect you have it. Telephone your GP or contact NHS direct on 0845 4647. You can also access information on the NHS Direct website www.nhs.uk or assess your symptoms using their online symptom checker;
- If your GP confirms you have swine flu, you may be given a voucher reference number that will entitle you to anti-viral medication – depending on the level of your symptoms;
- **Do not collect the medication yourself**. Telephone a friend or neighbour to collect it on your behalf and drop it off to you;
- You should take normal medication for a temperature and ensure you keep drinking water to keep you hydrated.

What are the signs and symptoms of swine flu?

Typical symptoms include:

- Sudden fever and sudden cold

Other symptoms may include:

- Headache, tiredness, chills, aching muscles, limb or joint pain, diarrhoea or stomach upset, sore throat, running nose, sneezing and loss of appetite.

What happens if a member of my family is diagnosed?

Family members will not automatically be given antiviral medication unless they fall ill or are in one of the high risk groups (see below). The overwhelming majority of patients are developing a mild form of swine flu, however, if you do develop symptoms you should follow the steps above and contact your GP.

What are the high risk groups?

Those with chronic respiratory disease, chronic heart disease, chronic kidney disease, chronic liver disease, chronic neurological disease, immunosuppression (whether caused by disease or treatment) or diabetes mellitus; patients who have had drug treatment for asthma within the past three years, pregnant women, people aged 65 and over and young children under five years old.

What other things should I think about?

- You should talk to your friends and neighbours now and discuss/agree to be each others 'flu friends' to collect medication or other items should you need them;
- Check your shopping to ensure you continue to have basic provisions, in case you develop symptoms and cannot go out to shop for a few days;
- Ensure you have normal medication in to help if you have a temperature e.g. paracetamol. Ensure you read the instructions carefully and keep them out of the reach of children.

Could swine flu have an impact on where I work?

The short answer to this is yes, it could. All NHS and other organisations should now have activated their flu pandemic policy. Your local UNISON branch and manager will have more information regarding this but key points to take into account include:

- Familiarise yourself with the information within your organisation on how they are preparing for the pandemic;
- Take responsibility for your own health. If you have flu-like symptoms do not go into work. Follow the normal sickness reporting procedure and seek advice from your GP. You must do this by phone – please see detailed information above;
- Be aware that your organisation will come under pressure during this time and that in order to maintain the service, you may be asked to work in another part of the organisation or to take on new duties. All requests still need to be reasonable. Irrespective of the demands on the service, staff should not take on tasks or duties that they cannot safely perform;
- Along with staff developing symptoms, one of the biggest issues likely to impact on the health service will be staff needing to care for their children or elderly parents;
- It is anticipated that a swine flu vaccine will become available in the autumn. Health workers are likely to be a priority group to receive it and we would encourage members to be vaccinated against swine flu in addition to accessing the normal seasonal flu vaccine.

Other sources of information

England

www.nhsdirect.nhs.uk/

Information on swine flu

www.nhs.uk/AlertsEmergencies/Pages/Pandemicflualert.aspx

Northern Ireland

www.nidirect.gov.uk

www.nidirect.gov.uk/index/health-and-well-being/swine-flu.htm

Scotland

www.nhs24.com

www.nhs24.com/content/default.asp?page=home_SwineFlu

Cymru/Wales

www.nhsdirect.wales.nhs.uk

www.nhsdirect.wales.nhs.uk/small/en/home/highlightedstoriesarchive/swineflu

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www.unison.org.uk/healthcare