Influenza A(H1N1) virus (Q&A)

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The virus involved in the Spring 2009 global influenza outbreak is a new strain of influenza virus affecting humans. Although referred to as swine influenza in many reports, scientific evidence shows that it is different from the swine influenza virus affecting pigs. This new type of virus includes swine, avian and human virus components in a combination that has never been observed before.

The virus has been characterised and is officially known as A(H1N1) meaning that this is a type A influenza which has 2 antigens on its surface: hemagglutinin type 1 (H1) and neuraminidase type 1 (N1).

As this new strain of human influenza was first identified in North America and Mexico, it is sometimes referred to as North American or Mexican Influenza.

Can the Influenza A(H1N1) virus be transmitted to humans by eating pork and pork products?

No. The Influenza A(H1N1) virus is not transmitted by eating cooked pork and pork products as it is killed at an internal temperature of 160°F/70°C. To date, there is no epidemiological evidence to suggest that the virus could be transmitted through eating contaminated pork or pork products. It is always recommended to follow proper food hygiene in kitchens and wash your hands with soap after handling raw meat.

What about people who eat raw pork meat?

This new virus has not been isolated from animals to date and there is no indication that the virus is currently in the pork production chain. The European Food Safety Authority is not aware of any scientific evidence of risk to pork consumers from influenza viruses regardless of the type of pork consumed. However, whilst some consumers may enjoy eating raw meat, longstanding food safety advice is to avoid eating raw meat in order to prevent possible risk of food-borne illness. Cooking meat properly kills bacteria or viruses which may be found in foods.

What is being done in Europe to combat the Influenza A(H1N1) virus?

The European Commission is working closely with the EU Member States, the European Centre for Disease Prevention and Control, the World Health Organization, as well as with the United States and Mexico. These organisations are closely monitoring the evolution of the A(H1N1) virus.

To protect yourself, the World Health Organization recommends practicing general preventive measures for influenza:
Avoid close contact with people who appear unwell and who have fever and cough.

Wash your hands with soap and water frequently and thoroughly.

Practice good health habits including adequate sleep, eating nutritious food, and keeping physically active.

Seek medical attention if you develop any symptoms of influenza-like illness.

If you are living in a country where the Influenza A(H1N1) virus has caused disease in humans, follow additional advice from national and local health authorities.

Additional Resources:

2. European Commission. Pandemic Influenza (H1N1)
3. European Food Safety Authority (EFSA) New Influenza A(H1N1)
4. World Health Organization. Pandemic (H1N1) 2009