

[youtube:<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=GWMZp5x8qgc>] Governments teams are meeting in emergency sessions around the world to plan urgent responses to Swine Flu Virus (H1N1) after over 1,600 cases were reported in less than 48 hours in Mexico with others reported or suspected in the US, Canada and the UK

By early 27th April 2009 over 1600 cases had already been reported in Mexico with over 100 deaths – up from zero reported cases in just 48 hours.

John McCaulay from the National Institute of Medical Research in the UK has said that the death toll could be as high as that from Spanish Flu in 1918-1919 which is thought to have killed 30 million people – out of a much smaller world population – less than half the number of people in the world today.

Dr Patrick Dixon, Chairman of Global Change Ltd and author of Futurewise said: "We are in a race against time to prevent a global pandemic. We must also remember that even if the spread of Swine Flu Virus is as well contained as Sars was in 2003, there could still be huge business disruption around the world. Sars only infected 8600 people in 2003 of which 862 died, but wiped billions of dollars from stock markets in South East Asia and caused major challenges for international travel, as well as social chaos in places like Hong Kong where people feared for weeks to gather in public places. Sars only infected 8,600 before being contained, but this Swine Flu Virus has probably already infected well over 1,600."

This mutant version of Swine Flu has jumped from pigs to humans, combining it seems elements of bird flu, swine flu, and human flu. People who have had human flu in the past are unlikely to be protected, nor those recently vaccinated against human flu.

The World Health Organisation is closely monitoring the situation which it believes is still containable. All depends on early recognition and confirmation of diagnosis of new cases, strict isolation (quarantine).

Key issues are: □

Infectivity – high

Death rate – 100 of 1600 cases so far but could be higher or lower – higher as current cases are treated and some more people die; lower if it turns out that many cases that are mild have been missed for some time, of people who have got better.

Response to treatment – appears to respond to Tamiflu and other measures

Incubation period – if long, then people can be infectious and without symptoms for longer and spread will be harder to control

Location – in more remote areas or in emerging nations with less health care resources, new mutant viruses can be harder to detect, and harder to control spread

Ability to mutate further - high

World is well prepared because of Sars

The world is well prepared to deal with the threat, following the outbreak of Sars in April 2003, when 862 died of around 8600 cases across the world, causing major disruption, billions of dollars of lost business.

Stocks of anti-viral [medicines](#) are high and travellers are being screened at some airports for symptoms. Expect all measures like this to be scaled up very fast.

Only 20 deaths out of 100 suspected fatalities have been confirmed to have been caused by the new virus.

The US has declared a public health emergency after 20 cases were reported – an indication of how serious the threat is being seen to be and how disruptive it will be if small clusters of cases are reported across the world.

There are confirmed cases in Canada, and investigations are being carried out on possible cases in Spain, Israel and New Zealand. A huge problem is that mild Swine Flu cases look identical to doctors to ordinary flu – so we can expect many millions of worried people over the next few weeks in every nation.

Vigilance urged

The World Health Organization (WHO), the UN's health agency, has said the swine flu virus could be capable of mutating into a more dangerous strain. Officials say they need more information on the virus before deciding whether to raise the global pandemic alert phase.

The WHO is advising all countries to on the alert for seasonally unusual flu or pneumonia-like symptoms among their populations - particularly among young healthy adults, a characteristic of past pandemics.

H1N1 is the same kind of virus that causes flu outbreaks in humans but the new version contains genes from versions of flu which usually affect pigs and birds. It is spread mainly through coughs and sneezes just like ordinary flu. Most of those killed so far in Mexico were young adults - rather than more vulnerable children and the elderly.

There is no vaccine for the new strain of flu but severe cases can be treated with antiviral medication. Vaccine will take some weeks to make and at least 8 months on a large scale.

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