


Worried about swine flu? Wash your hands

By Maggie Fox | April 25, 2009

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WORRIED about swine flu? There is one easy way to protect against infection, health experts agree - handwashing.

Global health officials are worried about an unusual new strain of flu that may have killed as many as 68 people in Mexico, with 1000 showing possible symptoms. It has infected at least eight people in the United States.

Officials at the US Centers for Disease Control and Prevention and the California Department of Public Health said they expected to find more cases in the coming days and weeks.

Little can be done to prevent an outbreak of flu from spreading, health experts caution, but they say common sense measures can help individuals protect themselves.

Number one is hand-washing, they say - a surprisingly effective way to prevent all sorts of diseases, including ordinary influenza and the new and mysterious swine flu virus.

"Cover your cough or your sneeze, wash your hands frequently," advised Dr Richard Besser, acting CDC director.

Influenza can spread in coughs or sneezes, but an increasing body of evidence shows little particles of virus can linger on tabletops, telephones and other surfaces and be transferred via the fingers to the mouth, nose or eyes.

Alcohol-based gel or foam hand sanitizers work well to destroy viruses and bacteria.

Anyone with flu-like symptoms such as a sudden fever, cough or muscle aches should stay away from work or public transportation and should see a doctor to be tested.

"If you have the flu, then you shouldn't be getting on the bus or getting on the plane and traveling," Dr Besser said.

"Social distancing" is another tactic. It means staying away from other people who might be infected and can include avoiding large gatherings, spreading out a little at work, or perhaps staying home and lying low if an infection is spreading in a community.

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