



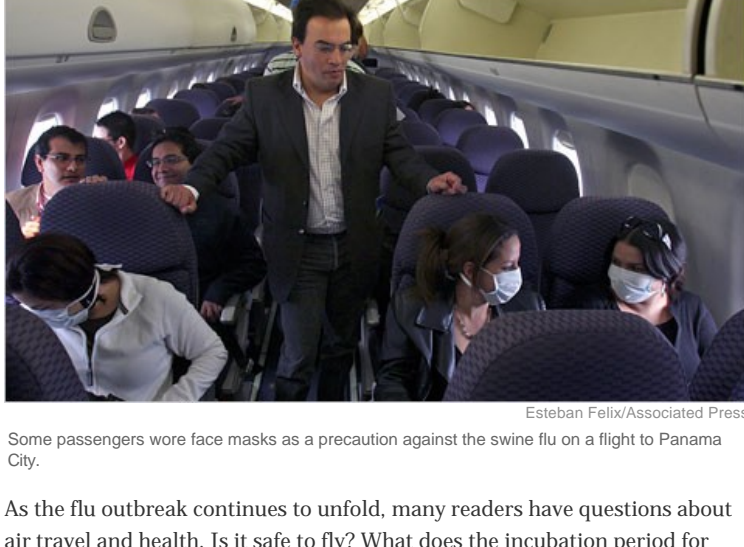
Consults

Experts on the Front Lines of Medicine

May 2, 2009, 6:00 AM

Flu Risk, Flying and Healthy Travel

By MARK GENDREAU, M.D.



Esteban Felix/Associated Press

Some passengers wore face masks as a precaution against the swine flu on a flight to Panama City.

As the flu outbreak continues to unfold, many readers have questions about air travel and health. Is it safe to fly? What does the incubation period for this flu mean in terms of travel? Will a former flu shot protect me while flying?

Dr. Mark Gendreau, senior staff physician and vice chair of emergency medicine at Lahey Clinic in Burlington, Mass., and assistant professor of emergency medicine at the Tufts School of Medicine in Boston, answers readers' questions about safe air travel in a time of flu.



Kazuhiro Nogi/AFP/Getty Images

Quarantine officers at Narita International Airport in Japan.

See, too, Dr. Gendreau's earlier Q&A on safe air travel during a flu outbreak, "Is It Safe to Fly During the Swine Flu Outbreak?" as well as "Readers' Questions: The Swine Flu Outbreak" and "More Readers' Questions About Swine Flu." If you have additional questions or comments, please post them in the Comments box below.

Q Is it still safe to travel by air?
A Yes, traveling by air remains safe. I would have no hesitation in flying or having one of my family members fly.

Air circulation patterns aboard standard commercial aircraft are side-to-side — a so-called laminar pattern — with air entering the cabin from the overhead, circulating across the aircraft in a circumferential manner and exiting the cabin near the floor.

It is important to continue to practice good hand hygiene, so bring an alcohol-based hand sanitizer that has at least a 50 percent alcohol content.

Many individuals with health problems have been writing in asking if they are at increased risk. I recommend that people with weakened immune systems, including anyone who has recently had a prolonged hospitalization or is taking immunosuppressive medications — avoid nonessential air travel for the time being.

Individuals with stable preexisting medical conditions should do fine, but keep in mind that the changes in cabin pressure during routine commercial flight can exacerbate these conditions, and common sense dictates checking in with your doctor before making travel arrangements.

Q Are my children at any greater risk of getting swine flu while traveling?
A In general, younger children are more vulnerable to infections, but children seem to be faring well in this particular outbreak.

Q I travel by air frequently for business, and I got the flu shot this season. Will that give me any protection against the swine flu?
A It will not prevent you from getting the flu — but a growing body of scientific evidence suggests it may reduce your chances of getting gravely ill or dying.

Receiving the vaccine causes your body's immune system to make neutralizing proteins called antibodies that are specifically targeted against that particular influenza strain — or closely related strains.

The good news is that annual influenza vaccination also appears to rev up special immune cells in your body that play a pivotal role in your body's immunity.

Q What's the incubation period for flu? Is the person contagious during that time?
A The incubation period of an infection refers to the time when an individual initially becomes infected to the time they start showing symptoms like fevers, chills or fatigue.

This symptom-free period is why airport screening is futile in the case of flu, since a good proportion of those screened can be contagious yet appear well.

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9 Comments

1. May 2, 2009 6:45 am
Link
In my previous comments (May 30, 2009), I noted that the viral enzyme called sialidase or neuraminidase located on the surface of every type of the influenza virus is an important drug target for treatment using FDA approved oseltamivir (Tamiflu) and zanamivir (Relenza).

So what to do when virtually all humans are potentially at risk? Absent the development of effective vaccines for new and variant influenza viruses, where do we go from here? What is the strongest predictor of lowered risk of infection by any novel influenza virus?

It is precisely within this framework that I believe the need to facilitate translation of basic scientific knowledge into applications. For example, the influenza virus has a lipid envelop within which integral viral proteins (hemagglutinin, matrix protein and neuraminidase) are embedded.

As a precaution, during a past year's outbreak of the seasonal flu, and where there was a shortage of vaccine, I was prescribed tamiflu. Is there an expiration? In other words, should I request a new perscription?

Correction: My previous comment was posted on April 30, 2009 and not on May 30, 2009. An Error such as this is similar to a specific mutation in the genes (viral RNA) for the three viral surface proteins.

Does it help to wear a face mask?

This discussion is really quite curious considering the fact that an average of 36,000 US residents a year die from normal garden variety flu right here in the good old USA.

I'm going to start using hand sanitizer as of my first trip on the subway today. As I'm not in any particular risk group, I'd probably be facing no worse than a week with the flu, but that's reason enough.

" In the case of flu, individuals can become infectious one to two days before developing the typical symptoms of fever, chills, headache and malaise — yet they are still able to pass it along to others."

What does this mean?

What your article doesn't address is the various lines a traveler must stand in to complete their travel. For instance: security, customs and baggage pickup.

Dzandu rebuts John's curiosity: John noted and I quote "this discussion is really quite curious considering the fact that an average of 36,000 US residents a year die from normal garden variety flu right here in the good old USA."

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