

Information Update from Department of Health

Swine Flu – Saturday 2 May 12noon

Current situation

There are now 13 confirmed cases in the UK – 10 in England and three in Scotland. Since the update at 3pm yesterday, when nine cases were confirmed, four further cases were confirmed last night:

One in Scotland (the first non-Mexican case in the UK).

Two in the South West (one of these is the first non-Mexican case in England).

One in the South East.

The arrangements in place across the UK are continuing to ensure that we are well-placed to deal with this new infection.

Latest Statement

Sir Liam Donaldson, the UK Government's Chief Medical Advisor, said:

“The first non imported cases of swine flu have been confirmed in England and Scotland. The infection appears to have been acquired by person to person spread within the United Kingdom. Until now, cases were confined to people who had themselves recently come back from Mexico.

“As the WHO has already said, it considers a pandemic to be imminent. We must all continue to be vigilant and try to reduce the spread of the virus. People have their part to play in controlling the spread of influenza. I would like to stress again that it is important for us all to practice good respiratory and hand hygiene. Always use a tissue to catch your sneezes, throw away used tissues where germs can linger and regularly wash your hands, or clean them with a sanitising gel.

“The UK has been preparing for the possibility of a pandemic for a number of years and is among the most prepared countries in the world. The NHS is ready to deal with a pandemic. Our plans are robust and advanced.”

Information for the public

If you have flu like symptoms and are concerned, stay at home, if you can go online check your symptoms on the symptom checker on www.nhs.uk or call the swine flu information line on 0800 1 513 513. If you have taken these steps and are still concerned call your GP or NHS Direct.

Preparedness

We have been preparing for the possibility of a pandemic for a number of years and are among the most prepared countries in the world.

The NHS has developed its planning from a national, local and individual level and our plans are robust and advanced.

What does level five mean?

Phase five indicates that WHO considers a global pandemic to be imminent, whereas at phase four a global pandemic is not inevitable. This means there has been person-to-person spread but it is still localised.

We are still not in a pandemic phase.

A change to phase five is a signal to countries' governments to ramp up their pandemic preparations – which we are already doing. In real terms stage five won't look that different in the UK.

Guidance to hospitals – critically ill patients could be turned away in a pandemic.

We are not yet in a pandemic and it is important to stress that.

The threat of a pandemic raises some very sensitive issues about how best to care for people in a widespread emergency of this nature. We have published this draft guidance to help clinicians to work within an ethical framework during a pandemic. It includes guidance on how best to make difficult decisions under pressure, and how to triage patients effectively, to ensure that patients get the best possible care.

It is sensible that we give advice to the NHS to help them make difficult decisions in difficult circumstances.

We have been preparing for the possibility of a pandemic for a number of years and are among the most prepared countries in the world. The preparations we have in place and are continuing to make will help to ensure we respond well in the event of a pandemic.

Access to Tamiflu

At this stage, antiviral medication, Tamiflu (Oseltamivir) or Relenza (Zanamivir) is only available on the NHS, for individuals who are suspected to have influenza on clinical grounds and on travel or contact history.

Health protection units have supplies of antivirals that are to be used in the initial mitigation steps for individuals who comply with the details described in the Health Protection Agency (HPA) algorithm - available at <http://www.hpa.org.uk/>

We currently have treatment courses for around 50 per cent of the population. This is one of the highest levels in the world. The stockpile is being conserved for treatment. We are increasing our stockpile to cover 80 per cent of the population.

Where suspect cases are being identified, arrangements are in place to ensure between GPs and the Health Protection Unit that tamiflu is made available locally. Health Protection Unit stocks are being replenished from the stocks held by the Emergency Preparedness Division of the Department of Health and stocks are available.

Has the Government banned pharmacists from giving out Tamiflu?

We have not withdrawn Tamiflu from over counter sales but, because we are increasing our stocks, pharmacists won't be able to buy any more at the moment. Normal supplies of tamiflu in pharmacists are usually relatively small as prescription is normally restricted by NICE guidelines.

Future antiviral distribution

As cases increase, systems will be put in place to distribute antivirals at a local level. This will mean most patients will be able to access treatment without needing to contact a doctor. GPs will not hold stock of antivirals on their premises.

Antivirals and Antibiotics

We have built up a significant stockpile of the antiviral drugs, tamiflu and relenza, to prepare for this situation. Both these drugs have proved effective in relieving the symptoms of those who have been infected.

But we will now increase this stockpile to cover 80 per cent of the population. This does not mean that we expect anywhere near this number of people to be affected. It does mean that we will have enough antiviral drugs to treat 50 million people, and make sure that all frontline NHS staff have their own supplies of antivirals as a preparatory measure.

In addition to increasing availability of antivirals, we are increasing our stockpiles of antibiotics. While antibiotics have no impact on the flu virus, they will be essential for dealing with any complications such as pneumonia, which might arise from infection.

Facemasks

There is no convincing scientific evidence that the widespread issue of facemasks to healthy members of the public can stop this disease spreading. Moreover, they give can false reassurance, and can encourage people to ignore basic and straightforward hand hygiene measures which have proven effectiveness.

However, specialist and other types of facemasks are useful for frontline NHS staff who are caring for infected patients, if they are the appropriate type; worn correctly; changed frequently; removed properly; disposed of safely and used in combination with good hygiene measures.

Although we have a supply of facemasks for NHS staff, we do need more. In the past 24 hours, we have completed contracts for over 60 million masks which will start becoming available from this week. These will be both surgical and respiratory masks, which will give staff a broad range of protection when they come into contact with infected patients.

Public Information Campaign

To keep the public informed, a mass public health campaign has begun with print, TV and radio adverts.

The adverts will warn the public about swine flu and remind people to cover their noses and mouths with tissues when they cough and sneeze and then throw the tissue away and wash their hands.

The message is simple: CATCH IT. BIN IT. KILL IT.

Members of the public who want further information can ring a single number, 0800 1 513 513, for regular recorded updates on the current situation.

In addition, a leaflet will be dropped through people's doors from next Tuesday (not everyone will get this on Tuesday, it will take a few days to get around the country).

Phase	
3	Human infection(s) with a new subtype, but no (or rare) person-to-person spread to a close contact
4	Small cluster(s) with limited person-to-person transmission but spread is highly localised, suggesting that the virus is not well adapted to humans
5	Large cluster(s) but person-to-person spread still localised, suggesting that the virus is becoming increasingly better adapted to humans
6	<p>Increased and sustained transmission in general population</p> <p>UK alert levels</p> <p>1 Virus/cases only outside the UK 2 Virus isolated in the UK 3 Outbreak(s) in the UK 4 Widespread activity across the UK</p>