

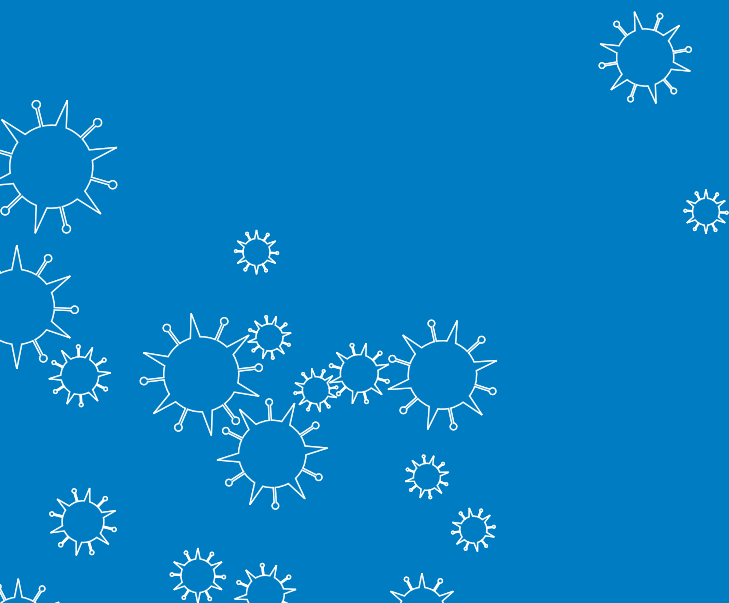


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Seasonal influenza, avian influenza and pandemic influenza – Good to know

Important information for you
and your family



What is influenza and what are the typical symptoms of this disease? What is avian influenza? What should people do in the event of pandemic influenza occurring in Switzerland? This booklet provides answers to questions on all three forms of influenza. It explains the differences between them – and how people can best protect themselves.

Definition

Influenza or “flu” is an acute infectious disease of the respiratory tract, caused by influenza viruses. The viruses are transmitted either directly via droplets (spread when an infected person coughs, sneezes or speaks) or indirectly through contact with surfaces (such as door handles) on which the viruses can survive for some time.

Seasonal influenza

Seasonal human influenza is an acute respiratory illness occurring between December and March in the Northern hemisphere. It is associated with symptoms such as fever, headache and aching muscles and may lead to serious complications. Every year, some 200,000 people in Switzerland are affected by seasonal influenza.

Avian influenza

Avian influenza, also known as fowl plague, is a highly contagious viral disease of animals. The best known avian influenza virus H5N1 is dangerous to various species of birds. As long as the avian influenza virus cannot be transmitted from human to human, there is no risk of infection for the Swiss population in the absence of exposure to infected poultry.

Pandemic influenza

Pandemics are outbreaks of (viral) diseases that spread across a number of countries or even continents. A pandemic is caused by the emergence of a new type of virus that is unfamiliar to the human immune system and readily transmissible from human to human.

The last century saw three major pandemics, all caused by the influenza virus – in 1918, 1957 and 1968. The most notorious of these, the so-called Spanish flu pandemic, killed millions of people worldwide in 1918–1919.

Current situation

For a human pandemic to occur, three conditions have to be met: the virus must be (1) of a new type, i.e. largely or completely unknown to the human immune system, (2) able to cause illness in humans and (3) readily transmissible from human to human. In the case of the avian influenza virus H5N1, the first two conditions are met but the third is not.

Seasonal influenza

Seasonal influenza, caused by influenza viruses, is one of the most common respiratory infections in humans. Outbreaks occur every year, usually between December and March.

In principle, anyone can contract influenza. While young adults generally make a good recovery, the disease may have serious consequences, especially for infants, elderly patients and people with chronic illnesses.

Symptoms

- » Sudden onset of fever (over 38°C)
- » Chills, headache, aching muscles and joints
- » Runny nose, dry cough and sore throat
- » Dizziness
- » Breathing difficulties
- » In children, abdominal pain, diarrhoea or vomiting may also occur

Patients with influenza do not normally require specific treatment. Depending on the symptoms and severity of disease, antipyretics and analgesics may be used. In addition, specific antiviral medicines are available which may be prescribed particularly for vulnerable patients*. However, these need to be taken no later than 48 hours after the onset of symptoms.

* To the risk groups belong people aged over 65 or with chronic medical conditions and anyone in regular contact with people at increased risk for complications, either within the family, at the workplace or during leisure activities.

Prevention

Vaccination offers the most effective protection against seasonal influenza, reducing the likelihood of infection and considerably diminishing the danger of any complications in risk groups*. Vaccination is recommended for all members of risk groups and for anyone who does not wish to contract influenza. The vaccine can be administered from the age of six months onwards. As the vaccine is adapted to the new strains of viruses circulating each year, vaccination has to be repeated annually between mid-October and mid-November.

A balanced diet, regular exercise and sufficient sleep help to maintain health at any age and boost the body's defences against infections and other diseases. However, these measures are not adequate in themselves to prevent influenza.

Personal hygiene

In general, the following measures help to reduce the spread of pathogens:

- » Wash your hands frequently and thoroughly with soap and water.
- » Use a handkerchief if possible or cover your mouth with your hand when coughing or sneezing. Then wash your hands thoroughly with soap and water.
- » Use paper tissues and dispose of them in a waste bin.
- » If you are suffering from the above-mentioned symptoms, avoid contacts with other people as far as possible, e.g. by staying at home.

Links for further information

www.grippe.admin.ch
www.grippe.ch
www.influenza.ch
www.bag.admin.ch

Avian influenza

Avian influenza, also known as fowl plague, is a highly contagious disease of animals, caused by a wide variety of influenza viruses. The best known avian influenza virus H5N1 affects chickens, turkeys, ducks, geese and other – mainly aquatic – bird species. Transmission of the avian influenza virus to humans is rare and only possible in the event of contact with infected poultry or birds (feathers, secretions, excreta). No risk is posed by boiled or fried meat.

In certain regions of the world, mainly in Asia, several hundred people have become infected with the avian influenza virus since 2003, and about half of these patients died as a result. The initial symptoms are similar to those of seasonal influenza, but they also include severe breathing difficulties and respiratory distress.

Protective measures for humans

As long as the avian influenza virus cannot be transmitted from human to human, there is no risk of infection for the Swiss population in the absence of exposure to infected poultry. However, since diseased wild birds were found in this country in 2006, the following measures have been recommended:

- » Avoid direct contact with waterfowl.
- » Do not touch sick or dead birds.

Links for further information

www.bvet.admin.ch

www.bag.admin.ch

www.oie.int

Pandemic influenza

The term “pandemic influenza” refers to a massive, worldwide outbreak of influenza. What is characteristic of an influenza pandemic is the fact that the disease is caused by a new influenza virus, to which humans lack immunity and which – unlike avian influenza – can be readily transmitted from one person to another. The disease spreads rapidly, leading to large numbers of severe cases.

A number of pandemics of this type have occurred in the past, the most notorious being the Spanish flu pandemic, which killed 20–40 million people worldwide in 1918. Pandemic influenza is likely to recur in the future, but no one knows where or when the next outbreak will occur.

Possible symptoms and treatment

- » The symptoms are not known in detail, as the pandemic influenza virus does not currently exist.
- » The symptoms could be similar to those of seasonal influenza, but possibly more severe.
- » The time to onset of symptoms is probably a few hours to days after infection.

Antiviral medicines can be used to alleviate the course of the disease and to control the spread of the virus. In the event of a pandemic, the authorities will be responsible for the distribution of antiviral medicines.

Prevention

Switzerland’s pandemic preparedness is based on various protective measures, which are summarized in the Swiss Influenza Pandemic Plan.

The most effective protection against a pandemic virus is offered by vaccination. However, in the event of a pandemic, an appropriate vaccine will only be available 4–6 months after the outbreak, since it will take this long to isolate and characterize the new virus and to produce a vaccine. In the meantime, protection will initially be provided by a prepandemic vaccine. A vaccine of this kind stimulates the human immune system and confers resistance to various viral strains, as long as they are closely related to the influenza virus contained in the vaccine. The prepandemic vaccine purchased and stored by the federal authorities was developed using the existing avian influenza virus H5N1. If the new pandemic virus is related to the H5N1 strain – as is expected by experts today – the prepandemic vaccine will provide the public with initial protection. Therefore, in the event of a pandemic, the federal authorities will first offer the public a dose of the prepandemic vaccine, which will subsequently be supplemented by a dose of the pandemic vaccine. For the public, both vaccinations will be voluntary and free of charge.

Additional precautions

- » Wash your hands frequently and thoroughly with soap and water.
- » Use a paper tissue to cover your mouth and nose when sneezing or coughing. After use, dispose of the tissue in a waste bin and then wash your hands with soap.
- » Keep a distance of at least one metre between yourself and people you are talking to.
- » When you meet or say goodbye to people, refrain from shaking hands, hugging or kissing.
- » Wear a hygiene mask in certain situations, as recommended by the authorities.
- » Avoid gatherings of people.
- » Keep rooms well aired.

Links for further information

www.pandemia.ch
www.bag.admin.ch/pandemie
www.who.org

Further information is available at:

www.bag.admin.ch

Official website of the Federal Office of Public Health (FOPH).

www.bvet.admin.ch

Official website of the Federal Veterinary Office (FVO).

www.grippe.admin.ch

Official FOPH website on the topics of seasonal influenza, avian influenza and pandemic influenza. Information mainly addressed to healthcare professionals.

www.grippe.ch

A network of healthcare institutions in French-speaking Switzerland, various associations of healthcare professionals and university departments. This website provides background information on the prevention and treatment of influenza, both for healthcare professionals and for the public.

www.influenza.ch

Website of the Geneva-based National Influenza Centre (CNI) in partnership with the FOPH and Sentinel Surveillance physicians. A wide range of information on influenza, influenza viruses, vaccination and influenza monitoring in Switzerland.

www.oie.int

Official website of the World Organisation for Animal Health (OIE).

www.pandemia.ch

FOPH website providing background information on the emergence and course of a pandemic and on recommended measures for prevention and protection.



If you have any queries please consult your physician or pharmacist, or during office hours ring the FOPH hotline on ++41 (0)31 322 21 00 (advice provided free of charge, calls charged at the national long-distance rate).

Key personal hygiene measures

Personal hygiene measures can help to protect yourself and others from infections:



Wash your hands frequently and thoroughly with soap and water (especially before eating).



When coughing or sneezing, hold a paper tissue in front of your mouth and nose. If you don't have a handkerchief, hold your hand in front of your mouth and nose and wash your hands immediately afterwards with soap and water, or hold your arm in front of your mouth and nose.



Dispose of paper tissues in a waste bin immediately after use and then wash your hands.



When you meet people, avoid shaking hands and keep at least one metre away from them. Stay at home if you have the following symptoms:

- » Sudden onset of fever (over 38°C)
- » Chills, headache, aching muscles and joints
- » Runny nose, dry cough and sore throat
- » Dizziness, occasionally also breathing difficulties
- » In children, abdominal pain, diarrhoea or vomiting may also occur



During a pandemic, the authorities recommend that you wear a hygiene mask in certain situations. The precise situations can only be defined after the emergence of the pandemic virus. The public is advised to lay in a stock of 50 hygiene masks (surgical masks) per person at an early stage, so as to avoid possible shortages.

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