

Putting the H1N1 Virus, So-called Swine Flu, into Perspective

We Americans tend to get a bit too overwrought during national emergencies. Yes, the H1N1 virus, so-called swine flu, is unsettling. Yes, it has the potential to get worse. But it's important that we all put this outbreak into perspective.

Even the term swine flu sounds exotic and unsettling. But bear in mind that any animal species — humans, swine, seals and birds, to name only a few — can serve as mixing vessels for flu viruses. Any animal can be affected by multiple flu viruses simultaneously. Sometimes, this enables the genetic material in these various viruses to be exchanged, resulting in a different virus.

In the case of the H1N1 virus, this genetic exchange apparently occurred in swine — it just as easily could have occurred in humans. For that matter, the next big flu outbreak could originate in humans, birds, seals or some other animal species.

We should also view H1N1 within the wider context of seasonal flu. Each year, seasonal flu and its complications claim between 33,000 and 35,000 lives in the United States — 300 in Alabama alone. Yet, most of us don't panic with the arrival of flu season.

So what makes H1N1 any different from seasonal flu? Nothing much, other than that this H1N1 strain seems to be somewhat better equipped at spreading within small populations. Even so, as of this writing, the virus is still considered a comparatively mild one, nothing like the super strain that claimed tens of millions of lives following the flu pandemic of 1918. In fact, experts using computer technology to analyze the current swine-flu strain currently see it lacking the characteristics of more lethal pandemics like the notorious 1918 outbreak.

Also, remember that flu viruses are highly unstable, meaning that this H1N1 strain could just as easily become less virulent as it could more virulent within the next few weeks. That's the nature of viruses. Simply put, just because an outbreak of a new flu strain occurs doesn't mean it's on a clear trajectory toward deadly mutation.

A growing number of scientists appear to believe the strain could become highly transmissible but relatively more moderate in its effects within the next few weeks.

Does that mean we should discount the likelihood of this outbreak developing into a serious pandemic?

No. But even if it does build into a pandemic, we should not forget that medical science is far better equipped to deal with a pandemic than it was in 1918, which marked the worst pandemic in history.

Drug manufacturers already are ramping up production of Tamiflu, which has been shown to be effective in treating H1N1. The U.S. government has also amassed a large reserve of Tamiflu, some of which already has been dispersed throughout the country, to ensure it will be readily available in the event of an outbreak.

A system already is in place to ensure that even large supplies of Tamiflu are produced in the event of an especially serious pandemic, though such an outbreak seems unlikely.

Antibiotics are also now widely available to treat bacterial infections that would likely accompany such a virus. Marked improvements in surveillance and sanitation have also occurred within the last century.

In the meantime, there is no threat from eating pork. Swine influenza viruses are not transmitted by food. Neither can swine flu be acquired from eating pork or pork products. Eating properly handled and cooked pork products is safe.

The best preventative measures for H1N1 or any flu strain is remembering to wash your hands frequently and to cover your mouth when you cough. Also, avoid touching your eyes, nose or mouth.

Germs spread that way.

Finally, stay home if you get sick. CDC recommends that you stay home from work or school and limit contact with others to keep from infecting them.

Otherwise, remember to put this issue into proper perspective and get on with your life.

Source: Dr. Robert Norton, veterinary bacteriologist and Auburn University professor of poultry science.