

What is influenza A?

The current influenza A (swine flu) pandemic is caused by a new strain of flu virus subtype known medically as H1N1 influenza A. It has been catalogued as a "pandemic" because of the speed at which it has spread to a lot of countries in a short time..

Do people with HIV run a greater risk of catching influenza A?

No. As with other strains, having HIV does not generally increase the chances of catching this flu.

Do people with HIV run the risk of being more ill with influenza A?

Not usually. It can be more serious for people with a low CD4 count (under 200 cells/mm³). This is mainly because the symptoms of other serious infections may be confused with those of flu. If you have flu symptoms, a low CD4 count, other health complications or you are pregnant, you are advised to contact your primary healthcare centre or your hospital's HIV unit.

How does influenza A differ from seasonal flu?

It is a new strain of flu virus to which most people are not currently immune.

How does influenza A spread?

Influenza A spreads through contact among people (just like normal flu), especially if they do not cover their mouth when sneezing or do not wash their hands.

Does medication work in people with HIV?

Antiviral drugs used to treat flu (such as oseltamivir [Tami-flu®] and zanamivir [Relenza®]) work in patients with HIV. None of them cure: they work to reduce the duration of the illness, the chance of complication, and the spread of influenza A to other people.

Can flu treatments interact with anti-HIV drugs?

Interactions between Tamiflu® and protease inhibitors (PIs) enhanced with ritonavir (Norvir®) and some antiretroviral drugs from the family of Nucleoside analog reverse transcriptase inhibitors (lamivudine, emtricitabine and tenofovir) may occur. However, the benefits of drugs for influenza A outweigh this small risk. Health professionals can inform you about this aspect.

If I need treatment for influenza A, where can I get medication?

Antiviral drugs are available with a doctor's prescription at chemists'. Primary healthcare doctors can prescribe them after visiting the patient and assessing whether they are necessary.

What should I do if I think I have the symptoms?

Up to now, most cases of influenza A have been minor, with few symptoms and no complications. Many patients can therefore recover at home with proper monitoring by professionals, if necessary, and need not be hospitalised. In most people, flu clears up by itself upon taking the usual measures such as drinking plenty of liquids (water and juices, etc.), using antipyretics and analgesics (such as Paracetamol), following the recommendations of health professionals until they recover, and avoiding passing it on to other people. It is important to maximise hygiene. However, people with flu symptoms who experience breathing difficulties, who have unusual symptoms, or whose condition suddenly gets worse or worsens seven days after the appearance of the illness, should contact the health service.

When does flu occur?

The risk period for flu (including influenza A) is in autumn and winter, and especially from September to December.

Is there a vaccination against influenza A?

Yes. The vaccination does not always prevent illness, but it does provide some protection against it and reduces the risk of complication.

Should I vaccinate against influenza A?

Vaccination is not compulsory. However, people with HIV are recommended to vaccinate against influenza A, just as they are advised to vaccinate against common flu. Receipt of this or other vaccinations requires registration at a primary healthcare centre (*see InfoVIHtal #26 Access to healthcare in Spain*).

Where can I get further information?

The Ministerio de Sanidad y Política Social (Ministry of Health and Social Policy) has set up a website (www.informaciongripea.es) and a telephone helpline (901 400 100) where you can obtain updated information. Your primary healthcare centre can also provide specific information. The Enquiry Service of the Grupo de Trabajo sobre Tratamientos del VIH (gTt) can answer your enquiries if you call 93 458 26 41 or write to consultas@gtt-vih.org.