Swine Flu Update – Tuesday, April 28

As the public attention focused on swine flu continues to increase, we wanted to let you know that MGH is closely monitoring the situation in Massachusetts, across the country and around the world. We also are taking various precautionary steps to ensure that our hospital is prepared to respond should we begin to see an increasing number of patients with this new type of influenza.

On Monday, the World Health Organization (WHO) raised its influenza pandemic alert from a level-three threat to a level-four threat on its six-level scale. Level four means that the WHO has determined the virus is capable of significant sustained human-to-human transmission, and that the likelihood of a pandemic has increased, even though a pandemic is not necessarily inevitable.

As of this morning (Tuesday), there had been no confirmed cases of swine flu in Massachusetts or in New England, according to the national Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC). The CDC is reporting that across the United States, there have been 40 confirmed cases, with 28 of those in New York. Other states with swine flu are California, Texas, Kansas and Ohio. Fortunately, most of the cases in this country have been associated with relatively mild symptoms, and no patient has died. Mexico has reported the most cases of the disease, with numerous deaths. Limited numbers of cases have also been confirmed in Canada, Scotland, Spain, Israel and New Zealand.

Because there are additional locations with confirmed cases, the CDC has just modified its case definition for a suspected case of swine flu. The new guidelines state that a patient should be considered a suspected case of swine flu if he or she has an acute respiratory illness with fever with onset:
1. within 7 days of close contact with a person who is a confirmed case of swine influenza A (H1N1) virus infection, OR
2. within 7 days of travel to a community either within the United States or internationally where there are one or more confirmed swine flu cases, OR
3. resides in a community where there are one or more confirmed swine flu cases.

At the MGH, the Emergency Department and various hospital practices have seen a modest increase in the number of patients who are calling or showing up because they are concerned about flu-like symptoms, including fever, cough, sore throat, aches, headache, chills and fatigue. Many different diseases are associated with these common symptoms, and it is unlikely that someone with one or more of these complaints has the swine flu. We, however, have been evaluating symptomatic patients to determine whether they have
some form of influenza, and in several cases we have sent samples to the State Lab for further testing because the patients had recently been to Mexico or to locations with confirmed cases. We have not yet received final laboratory results for these patients.

Representatives from various hospital departments have been meeting daily to review and refine our emergency management plans, which detail how and where we would treat and manage large numbers of patients and how we would prevent the spread of disease among health care workers and patients. On Monday, MGH participated in a discussion with the Department of Public Health and representatives from hospitals throughout Massachusetts to discuss a coordinated response to a potential outbreak of swine flu in the state. At this point, preparation, information and communication are our best tools to deal with the uncertainty of this situation.

With that in mind, we remind you that every member of the MGH community plays a vital role in preventing the spread of disease at the hospital. Your participation will be especially important if we are called upon to care for patients with swine flu. We ask all employees and volunteers to adhere to simple, common sense measures of infection control. These include:

- **Practice effective hand hygiene.** Use Cal Stat, which is available in dispensers throughout the hospital, or if hands are soiled, wash hands with soap and water for at least 15 seconds, dry hands and the use Cal Stat. For care providers, Cal Stat must always be used before and after contact with a patient or with the patient’s environment.
- **Cover your nose and mouth with a tissue when you cough or sneeze.** Throw the tissue away immediately, and then clean your hands. If a tissue is not available, cough or sneeze into your upper sleeve.
- **Avoid close contact with people who are ill,** especially those who have recently traveled to areas known to have cases of swine flu. Wear a surgical mask if you have respiratory symptoms and need to go to the hospital, doctor’s office or other public place.
- **Keep your hands away from your eyes, nose and mouth.**
- **Stay home if you are sick.**

We will provide you with additional updates about swine flu as we get more information. Meanwhile, we encourage you to check the CDC website [www.cdc.gov/swineflu](http://www.cdc.gov/swineflu) for details and regular updates. If you have questions or concerns about swine flu, please contact the Infection Control Unit (617-726-2036) or the Infectious Diseases fellow on call for nights and weekends. For questions about clinical management, contact the Division of Infectious Diseases (617-726-3812) or the Infectious Diseases fellow on call for nights and weekends. For questions about diagnostic specimen handling, contact the Virology Laboratory (617-726-3820) or the Microbiology/Pathology resident on call for nights.
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