



# Swine Flu Outbreak Raises Concern Worldwide, but Not Panic

*The Wired Word for May 3, 2009*

## **In the News**

An outbreak of swine flu in recent days, which appears to have started in Mexico, has now spread to the United States and at least 12 other countries. It has caused a heightened sense of concern among world and national health organizations, increased anxiety among some people in various parts of the world and raised the possibility -- but by no means the certainty -- of a worldwide pandemic.

Swine flu is a respiratory disease in pigs that is airborne and can spread to humans. Once in a human host, it can spread from one human to another, mutating as it does so.

As of Thursday, Mexico had experienced the greatest number of swine flu cases and the most fatalities from it, reporting about 170 deaths and nearly 3,000 cases overall. In the United States, confirmed cases had risen to at least 91 and one person, a 22-month-old child visiting from Mexico, had died from the disease. Canada, New Zealand, Israel, Spain, Germany, Austria, Switzerland, the Netherlands, Peru and the United Kingdom all reported one or more cases of the swine influenza as well, but no deaths.

While the World Health Organization, United States Centers for Disease Control, similar health bodies in other countries and national governments are all on heightened alert to try to prevent the spread of the disease, most are saying the outbreak is currently a cause for concern but not yet for alarm.

The exception is Mexico, where, so far, the outbreak has been worse than elsewhere and has caused more deaths. Authorities in Mexico City have ordered some 35,000 public venues to close in an effort to contain the virus. Bars, clubs, movie theaters, sports centers, convention halls, stadiums, schools and other places have all shut down. Restaurants cannot serve meals in house but can dispense take-out orders. Many thousands of surgical masks have been handed out to the public.

Worldwide, the number of infections from this flu is still small and many of those cases have proven to be mild, with most people making a full recovery. But the concern is driven by the fact that this is a new virus and people have no natural immunity to it. Thus, should swine flu become a pandemic, the number of fatalities could be higher than from other influenzas. Also, because it is new, there is as yet no vaccine against it, though work is under way now to create one.

Concern about the potential for widespread deaths from this flu also arises from previous experience of a worldwide flu pandemic. From March 1918 to June 1920, a plague of Spanish flu affected an estimated one-half of the world's population and killed anywhere from 20 to 100 million people around the planet, breaking out in even the Arctic. Most of its victims were healthy young adults, in contrast to most influenza outbreaks that predominantly affect juvenile, elderly or otherwise weakened patients.

Most observers agree that today's health organizations and medical centers are better equipped to deal with major outbreaks than were those in 1918, and better medicines are available. Still, health officials believe that the potential for an epidemic from swine flu needs to be taken seriously and sensible measures taken to contain it. In the United States, the appropriate medicines have been stockpiled and placed at various locations from which they can be broadly distributed if needed.

On Wednesday, the World Health Organization raised its current level of influenza pandemic alert from phase 4 to 5, its second-highest level, which means that a pandemic is "imminent." The WHO urged all countries to immediately activate their pandemic preparedness plans.

But there is also the fact that the 1976 death of a soldier at Fort Dix in New Jersey from swine flu, which brought predictions of an impending health emergency, proved not to be the leading edge of an epidemic. Although 155 other soldiers in the same camp tested positive for swine flu antibodies, none died from it. And eventually, that outbreak died out on its own.

Regarding the current outbreak, most health professionals in the United States say that major alarm is not warranted, at least not at present, though ongoing monitoring and preparation is vital. They advise everyone to practice good sanitary measures, including careful and frequent hand-washing, covering coughs and sneezes, and remaining at home when ill.

The more common seasonal influenzas kill a quarter- to a half-million people worldwide every year.

More on this story may be found at these links:

<http://abcnews.go.com/Health/SwineFlu/story?id=7467397&page=1>  
<http://www.cnn.com/2009/HEALTH/04/29/swine.flu/index.html#cnnSTCText>  
[http://www.cdc.gov/swineflu/?s\\_cid=swineFlu\\_outbreak\\_internal\\_001](http://www.cdc.gov/swineflu/?s_cid=swineFlu_outbreak_internal_001)  
<http://www.who.int/csr/disease/swineflu/en/index.html>  
<http://www.baltimoresun.com/news/nation/bal-te.swineflu29apr29.0.4194496.story>  
[http://blogs.tnr.com/tnr/blogs/the\\_plank/archive/2009/04/27/don-t-sound-the-alarm.aspx](http://blogs.tnr.com/tnr/blogs/the_plank/archive/2009/04/27/don-t-sound-the-alarm.aspx)  
[http://www.salon.com/env/feature/2009/04/28/1976\\_swine\\_flu/](http://www.salon.com/env/feature/2009/04/28/1976_swine_flu/)

### **The Big Questions**

*Here are some of the questions we will discuss in class:*

1. Is there a standard Christian response to *possible* threats to our well-being? If so, what is it?
2. It seems that fear is often the central motif that drives a lot of news coverage: fear of terrorism, fear of economic disaster, fear of job loss, fear of victimization from crime and now, fear of pandemic. In what ways is Christianity a different response to those things? What are its central motifs when it comes to threatening situations?
3. Why are some people naturally worriers and others naturally carefree? Does either attitude reflect anything about that person's faith? If so, what?
4. In terms of protecting ourselves from possible infection, how do we distinguish between prudent precautions and ridiculous ones?
5. Are basic sanitary procedures -- hand-washing, covering coughs and sneezes, remaining at home when ill, etc. -- really likely to have any bearing on the course of this disease? Why or why not?

### **Confronting the News with Scripture**

*We will look at selected verses from these Scripture texts. You may wish to read these in advance for background:*

Leviticus 13:9-17  
Psalm 23:1-6  
Matthew 6:25-33  
Jeremiah 29:1-14  
James 5:13-18