

Current Status of H1N1 “Swine Influenza”

Air Crew and Passenger Health Services

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People in the southern hemisphere are now experiencing winter—and “seasonal influenza”. This year there are “two influenzas” currently circulating south of the equator: Seasonal influenza and H1N1 influenza (i.e. “swine flu”). In the past few weeks, Argentina, Brazil, Chile, Costa Rica, El Salvador, Uruguay, Australia, etc have reported sharp increases in influenza cases. Some schools have closed, public activities suspended and/or increased medical surveillance has occurred. Experts predict that influenza will peak in July and early August.

The severity of “flu” in Central/South America does not appear different from the rest of the world. H1N1 influenza and “seasonal influenza” have similar symptoms and are mild in the majority of cases. Most deaths involve people with underlying medical conditions. The H1N1 virus has not “mutated” and it has not become more dangerous. Many people in the Southern Hemisphere were immunized for seasonal influenza prior to the start of the flu season. Currently, there is no immunization for H1N1; so the southern hemisphere will not benefit from H1N1 vaccine this year. Public health officials anticipate that there will be a resurgence of H1N1 in the Northern Hemisphere this fall, but are hopeful that there will be a H1N1 vaccine available by autumn. The CDC has not determined how it will be distributed, but it is likely that individuals with chronic health problems, children, pregnant women, & healthcare providers would be the first to be immunized. Experts also anticipate “normal” seasonal influenza for the Northern Hemisphere.

What’s our approach to the current influenza situation in the Southern Hemisphere; and what can we anticipate this fall?

1. Southern hemisphere countries are not under any travel health restrictions by the WHO or CDC for either passengers or crew.
2. Individuals with chronic health conditions may want to delay travel to locations where H1N1 is prevalent to decrease their health risk
3. Always practice good hand washing and respiratory hygiene. Avoid touching your eyes, mouth and nose with your hands; wash hands with soap/water or use alcohol-based hand sanitizer. Avoid people who appear ill with fever and respiratory symptoms.
4. Get a “seasonal flu” shot this fall.
5. Flight crew should observe for ill passengers prior to boarding and get further advice if a passenger is ill. If a passenger becomes ill during a flight (fever and coughing, sore throat, runny nose, muscle aches, vomiting, diarrhea, etc., ask the passenger to wear a disposable mask. Notify the CDC Quarantine Station at the destination hub or request QS consult prior to the flight if the illness is detected pre-boarding.
6. We will keep you posted if the WHO/CDC offers any additional guidelines to protect your health and well-being.