

H1N1 (Swine) Flu: How to Talk to Children About Swine Flu

A parent's job is never easy, but it gets a lot harder during times of stress. Like now, for example. We have a new flu virus circulating, which experts are calling H1N1 or swine flu. Naturally, you want to protect your kids. What should you tell them about this disease? How do you help keep them safe without scaring them? Here are some ideas.

Educate yourself. Before you talk to your kids, make sure you know your facts. Read up on swine flu on reputable sites like the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC). Learn about the symptoms and how it's spread so you can give your children accurate information.

Tailor the talk. Give your children a level of information that is appropriate to their age.

- **Young children** need simple facts. You can reassure them that adults are taking steps to keep them from getting sick and take care of them if they do. They can be taught to wash their hands to help kill germs.
- **Young adolescents** can take in more detail. They may have a lot of questions. It's likely they have heard about the flu from friends or TV, and they may need help to separate fact from fiction.
- **Older teens** can deal with adult-level information. Refer them to sources where they can check facts themselves, such as the CDC Website (www.cdc.gov).



Start the discussion. Find out what your children have heard about swine flu. Answer any questions they have and correct any false ideas. Encourage them to talk about their feelings. Getting the facts can help ease their anxiety.

Some important facts about swine flu to share with your kids:

- Only a small number of people have gotten sick.
- Most people, even ones who get the flu, have only mild symptoms and will be okay.
- Doctors can help people who get sick.
- Flu viruses are spread when people who are sick cough or sneeze.
- You can't get swine flu from eating pork products.
- There are things we can do to stay healthy and reduce the risk of getting the flu.

Teach prevention. Review the things your kids can do to help avoid swine flu and similar illnesses:

- Wash their hands often. Use soap and scrub under warm water for 15 to 20 seconds, about the time it takes to sing "Happy birthday" twice.
- Use an alcohol-based hand cleaner when they can't wash their hands.
- Cough or sneeze into a tissue or their elbow. Throw the tissue in the trash right away.
- Always wash their hands after they cough or sneeze.
- Keep their hands away from their nose, mouth or eyes.
- Stay at least six feet away from sick people (about the length of a bed).
- Avoid crowds if there's been a flu outbreak in your area.

Be available. Your children may need a little extra reassurance and a few more hugs during this time. Check in with them regularly, and make time to discuss their concerns.

Keep an eye on TV viewing. Try to limit how much they hear or see about the flu. Focusing too much on news about the virus can cause worry or fear. Talk about what they see on TV or the Internet and help them put it in context.

Walk the talk. Remember, your kids will take their cues from you. Talk is all well and good, but they will go by what you do, not just what you say.

- Model good hygiene by washing your hands properly and using tissues.
- Stay calm, and keep your daily routine as normal as possible. If you are calm, it's more likely your kids will be, too.