



# World Health Organization

## INFLUENZA-LIKE ILLNESS OUTBREAK IN THE US AND MEXICO

**Transcript of  
GLOBAL TELEPHONE NEWS CONFERENCE with Dr Margaret  
Chan, Director-General, World Health Organization  
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Opening Statement by Dr Margaret Chan**

Good afternoon, thank you for coming. WHO is concerned about cases of swine 'flu currently being reported in some areas of Mexico and in the United States. A new virus is responsible for cases in both countries. The situation is evolving quickly. A new disease is, by definition, poorly understood.

We do not yet have a complete picture of the epidemiology or the risks, including possible spread beyond the currently affected areas. Nonetheless, in the assessment of WHO, this is a serious situation which must be watched very closely.

Yesterday, while in the United States, I was able to speak directly with health officials in the US and in Mexico. Both countries have expressed their concern and I know they are taking the situation very seriously.

I thank them for their openness, transparency, and willingness to work with WHO to address this newly emerging infection.

Yesterday, I cancelled all planned meetings on other matters and cut short my trip to get back to Geneva.

Today, I spoke with WHO epidemiologists and infectious disease specialists in the different geographical offices of WHO. We do not, at present, have indications of similar outbreaks in other parts of the world.

Our vigilance will remain high. It would be prudent for health officials within countries to be alert to outbreaks of influenza-like illness, or pneumonia especially if these occur in months outside the usual peak influenza season.

Another important signal is excess cases of severe or fatal flu-like illness in groups other than young children and the elderly, who are usually at highest risk during normal seasonal flu.

We are today convening a meeting of an Emergency Committee to evaluate the evidence and advise me on an appropriate course of action. The Committee will also advise me on whether WHO needs to introduce any temporary measures in the interest of protecting international health.

Influenza viruses are notoriously unpredictable and full of surprises, as we are seeing right now. The viruses causing cases in some parts Mexico and the US are genetically



the same. This is an animal strain of the H1N1 virus, and it has pandemic potential because it is infecting people.

However, we cannot say, on the basis of currently available laboratory, epidemiological, and clinical evidence, whether or not it will indeed cause a pandemic.

As a precautionary measure, I have instructed all regional offices in WHO to work closely with their countries to assess if indeed similar outbreaks or unusual patterns of 'flu like illness and pneumonia have been observed. And we have also sent experts to Mexico at the request of the Government, to work with them to further analyse all the data and information, to answer some of the critical questions.

For example, how many of the 800 plus cases of severe pneumonia requiring hospitalization are indeed caused by this new virus, or other causes. And in addition, we will work with US scientists and scientists from other countries to help us to assess other important dimensions. For example, we need to know how the virus is spread, and what is the transmission pattern, and whether or not it is going to cause severe disease and what in age group. Clearly, in the days and weeks ahead, we need to work very closely with the US authorities as well as with the Mexican authorities, bringing together the world's experts to bear on this very important issue.

Above all, it is important that we will keep you, the public and keep our countries, our Member States and our ministers of health informed as we move forward on these and other issues. All these issues are receiving my highest personal attention. I will stop here and will be happy to answer any questions that colleagues from the media community may have.

**Journalist Associated Press.** I wondered if you could talk first of all about what some of the other countries are doing, if other Member States are taking measures and also go through some of things WHO might consider, like about travel recommendations, or border closures, what are the things being considered? Are there recommendations for public health interventions, like stopping mass gatherings?

**Dr Chan:** Thank you for that question. At this stage the most important recommendation coming from WHO to other countries is to increase and enhance their surveillance. As I said, for unusual pattern of disease, whether or not there is an increase in pneumonia cases, whether or not there are outbreaks of 'flu-like illness outside of their seasonal 'flu peak season. So those are the most important. Without that kind of information, it is very difficult to realize - to know whether or not the situation is indeed confined to US and Mexico as we're seeing now. Now as to your question about other border closures and travel advisories, I think it think it is too premature at this stage to make those announcements without, first and foremost having a better analysis, trying to understand the data that are coming from the Mexican authorities and help us to further understand exactly what is happening there.

So for now, we will not issue those recommendations, but of course, of course, these will be questions to be addressed by the Emergency Committee that will be convened later today.

**Journalist Canadian Press:** Thanks very much for taking my question, Dr Chan. I was wondering if you could tell us if you have any indication from the Mexican authorities about potential mild illness. We've been hearing about a death, and a death suspected to be associated with this virus, and lots of hospitalized cases. Given the pattern of infections in the United States, and given infectious diseases in general, you would expect, or at least hope, that there would be lots of mild cases, or that's what we are seeing is the tip of the iceberg, do you have any evidence for that?

**Dr Chan:** Thank you for that question. clearly this is an important question. Based on the limited number of cases in the US, so far reported 8 cases, all of them have recovered, and they are mild in terms of the severity of the disease. In Mexico, the picture, because of the size of the number of cases, we are seeing a range of severity, from mild to severe and to some deaths. So that is exactly what I was referring to in my earlier answer to Maria's question. We need to really comb through those data and get the granularities and understand exactly who is suffering and in which group the diseases are more severe than others and these are the work that the experts that we dispatch to the ground, they are already on the ground, working with the Mexican authorities, and hopefully, this will give us more information in the days ahead.

HB: Could I ask a follow-up question?

**Dr Chan:** Yes, go ahead.

**Journalist:** If I hear you correctly, would you say that it would be premature to try to assess what the case fatality of the virus is and I'd also like to ask if WHO is thinking about asking vaccine manufacturers to potentially switch to production of swine 'flu vaccine?

**Dr Chan:** Yes indeed. At this point in time it is too premature to calculate the case fatality rate. Hopefully, you know, more evidence will emerge to give us a better sense. And your second question is again we will definitely discuss this with the emergency committee, but on the basis of information available now, I'm sure, you know, the experts will agree we need to wait for a few more days and perhaps, based on the final analysis we can have a better handle on which way to go, vis a vis, vaccine production.

**Journalist at National Public Radio in the US.** My first question is what, precisely is the Emergency Committee going to consider today? There's been a bit of confusion whether you're considering whether to raise the alert level or whether you're meeting to decide to declare a public health emergency of international concern. And then I have a follow-up.

**Dr Chan:** Well, thank you for your question. I would expect the members of the Emergency Committee, having heard the reports and representations by the 2 governments, namely the US and Mexico, and also the overall assessment by WHO, they may need to address those questions, indeed.

Journalist: So, the question of pandemic alert is on the table?

**Dr Chan:** Yes, indeed.

**Journalist:** My follow-up is from my colleague Richard Knox. We've had a lot of trouble dialing into the conference today, here from the US. He wonders about the capacity of Mexico, especially Mexico City, to do the kind of 'flu virus typing that's needed in the kind of speed with which you need to come to decisions. Do they have the capacity there or will WHO somehow be helping them out with additional laboratory equipment or what?

**Dr Chan:** Thank you for that question. I think that this is a very important question. Our experience is that with any new and emerging infection no matter how good your existing laboratory capacity is, there would be requirement for additional research capacity in terms of having the right kind of methodology and the kind of skills to do those tests.

But I have to say the Mexican government has been very open, transparent, and they have shared virus samples with Health Canada and as well as with US Center for Disease Control (CDC). Scientists from these two countries are working with them to do exactly the kind of work that you are talking about. And in fact, I actually met the US authorities and I talked to the Minister of Health in Mexico. We also talked about providing WHO additional expert support in laboratory science to the Mexican authority. So I just want to say, yes, we are gearing up on our side and so is the Mexican authority and I would like to thank the international community who come to assist in this assessment. It is important that we get to the bottom of the matter as soon as possible. Speed is important. Capacity is important, and we are addressing both.

**Journalist from Reuters in Geneva:** Are you satisfied with the Mexican authorities have enough anti virals to address this outbreak and whether you fell that Tamiflu is going to be the answer to this and whether you have any indication that there is resistance to it among any population or any certain groups affected.

**Dr Chan:** At this point time the resistance test that has been done by scientist demonstrated that this new virus is sensitive to also Tamiflu. I also had a discussion with the Minister of Health on the issue of medicine. They do have a sizeable supply themselves but of course depending on how the outbreak evolves, WHO stands ready along with international partners to support the government if it is required to acquire additional supply.

**Journalist from NHK, Japan** - Want to confirm with Dr Chan, can we regard this virus as a pandemic potential virus and what kind of decisions do you think you can make in this Emergency Committee?

**Dr Chan:** As I mentioned in my statement earlier, this is clearly an animal strain of the H1N1 virus and it has pandemic potential because it is infecting people. The emergency committee that is convened under the authority of the International Health Regulation 2005 will examine a range of questions including whether or not based on the information available so far, what kind of recommendations they make.

But perhaps, let me take this opportunity to qualify. As I said, there are a lot of information gaps still because of the size of the outbreak, we need to really work in the days and weeks ahead with the Mexican authorities to find answers to some of the critical questions. Depending on how strong is the strength of evidence available today, we may have some answers to the kind of recommendations or questions you have raised and we may need perhaps a few more days to get further evidence to answer other questions. So in a nut shell, the experts would be examining a range of issues and we will do our best working with the two governments to present the available evidence, and based on those evidence, we will make appropriate temporary measures.

**Washington Post:** Timing of the meeting today and if you will be making a decision today and if so, what time and if you could explain, if you do raise the pandemic alert as a result of this meeting, what will be the impact of that.

**Dr Chan:** The Expert Committee will be convened today at about 16.00hrs Geneva time. Based on the whether the information as I said, whether we are going to announce this, confirm this, this is going to be a public health emergency of international concern - it has a set of implications and experts will need to look at what kind of temporary recommendations they can make. Some examples have been given - in the International Health Regulations 2005, article 18, some suggestions have been given for the consideration of the Emergency Committee.

**Bloomberg News in Paris:** What explanation do you have for the epidemiology in Mexico indicating disproportionate numbers of otherwise healthy young people coming to the illness and what parallels if any can we draw between this and the 1918 Spanish 'flu?

**Dr Chan:** Can we draw any parallel to the 1918 Spanish 'flu - it is too premature to say. Having said that, I suspect the reason you raise this question is because reports say a rather high proportion of young adults suffer from severe disease. This is one feature we were observing in the 1918 outbreak. Now, to answer your question whether or not we are indeed seeing that picture, that is one question we would like to have an answer and we need to look at whether or not the big number of cases reported are genuinely infections due to this new H1N1 or it is due to other viruses or

other causes of pneumonia, so don't have those data now and we will be happy to provide those data as and when they are available.

**Journalist from Japanese Newspaper** - Reported that many patients in Mexico are workers at hospitals and I would like to know why so many people in the medical field are infected by the virus?

**Dr Chan:** I would like to put on the record - it is not correct to say that there are "many" health care workers affected or infected, it is true that we have information that two health care workers were affected so we need to understand - that's the epidemiology and the history we need together, under what circumstances are the possible reasons for those infections to occur. It would be premature to jump to conclusions because they are health care workers that automatically the infection is from the health care setting - it could be or it could be due to other reasons. Those are exactly the kind of work, the kind of analysis WHO experts are working with Mexican authorities to find out and report back to all my Member States and of course to the media and through the media to the general public.

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