

Swine flu

As fears grow that swine flu is the long feared flu pandemic it is important that employers and health and safety advisors keep abreast of developments and information from authoritative sources. As swine flu is primarily a public health issue with implications for employers, Government health and safety agency websites tend to direct those seeking information to public health authority websites.

If the visitor the HSA website www.hsa.ie types in pandemic flu, he/she will be guided to the Health Protection Surveillance Centre website www.ndsc.ie/hpsc where factsheets on swine flu are available: click on Health Protection Surveillance Centre on the HSA website to visit the Health Protection Surveillance Centre. The Health Protection Surveillance Centre website provides very useful guidance and contains links to the following sources of further information:

<http://www.hse.ie/eng/>

<http://www.dohc.ie/>

<http://www.who.int/csr/disease/swineflu/en/index.html>

<http://www.cdc.gov/swineflu/>

<http://ecdc.europa.eu/en/>

From HSR's search for information and guidance on the topic one of the most informative websites is the US Government's Center for Disease Control and Prevention website: to access click on the fourth link in the list above. Another way to access US Government information is to click on <http://www.pandemicflu.gov/index.html>.

At this stage it is important to note that the World Health Organisation has not yet classified the swine flu outbreak as a pandemic. In a statement issued yesterday the WHO raised the level of alert to phase 4, which means that the likelihood of a pandemic has increased but that a pandemic is not yet inevitable. The WHO says the containment of the outbreak is not feasible. While it is not recommending the closing of borders or restrictions on international travel, it is advising that people developing symptoms following international travel should seek medical attention and that those who are feeling ill should delay travelling.

Speaking yesterday at an ICTU organised seminar in Dublin, the well known occupational physician Dr Martin Hogan of Employment Health Advisors said the present outbreak "has all the ingredients of a pandemic". If a pandemic is declared among the measures employers will have to consider are allowing people to work from home, not holding meetings and limiting travel. Good hygiene - hand washing, use of soap and masks - will be particularly important. Handshakes should be avoided as they are "a high means of transmission". Also close personal contact should be avoided. People should keep some distance between them: about two metres is recommended.