

Managing Your Anxiety about H1N1 Flu (Swine Flu)

The international prevalence and ongoing nature of H1N1 Flu (swine flu) together with speculation that it could become a more serious illness later this year can be anxiety producing. At a recent U.S. Department of Health and Human Services flu summit, President Obama advised against panic and recommended "vigilance" and "preparation." You can begin to prepare now by taking the following steps to manage your anxiety and maintain a positive outlook.

Keep things in perspective. Government officials are preparing for possible worst-case scenarios in order to protect the public. The public, however, does not need to expect the worst. Studies show that annual seasonal influenza is more severe than the current H1N1 flu. Most people who have contracted the H1N1 flu in the United States have recovered. In the limited number of fatal cases, the people affected were already battling a life threatening illness prior to contracting H1N1.

Get the facts. Gather information that will help you accurately determine your risk so that you can take reasonable precautions. Find a credible source you can trust such as news from www.flu.gov, a local or state public health agency, or local elected official such as a city mayor or state governor. The situation could evolve rapidly, so gather information at regular intervals in order to help you distinguish fact from rumors. Be wary of unsubstantiated rumors, which can be upsetting and may deter you from taking appropriate action.

Maintain a hopeful outlook. Public health agencies around the globe are working to identify outbreaks of the illness and to ensure the availability of the best medical care to those who are sick. Work has been underway for several months to develop a vaccine. For centuries, people have survived difficult life circumstances and gone on to live fulfilling and productive lives. There is no reason why this situation cannot be similar. Limit worry and agitation by lessening the time you and your family spend watching or listening to sensationalized media coverage.

Stay healthy. A healthy lifestyle—including proper diet, exercise and rest—is your best defense against any disease threat. Adopting hygienic habits such as washing your hands regularly will also minimize your exposure to all types of germs and disease sources. A healthy body can have a positive impact on your thoughts and emotions, enabling you to make better decisions and deal with the flu's uncertainties.

Build resilience. Resilience is the process of adapting well in the face of adversity, threats or significant sources of stress. Draw on skills you have used in the past that have helped you to manage life's adversities and use those skills to help you manage concerns about a flu pandemic. See APA's Road to Resilience brochure.

Have a plan. Think about how you might respond if the flu were discovered in your area. You may want to

stock up on non-perishable foods in case officials recommend staying home, consider options for working from home, and caring for sick family members, and establish an emergency family communication plan. Explore how you might spend your time if schools or businesses are closed. Planning some of these scenarios in advance can lessen your anxiety.

Communicate with your children. Discuss the flu with honest and age- appropriate information. If your children have concerns, addressing these together may ease their anxiety and distress. Parents can also help allay distress by focusing children on routines and schedules that remain unchanged despite any changes due to flu preparations. Remember that children will observe adults behaviors and emotions for cues on how to manage their own emotions during this time. Additional information on talking with your children is available from the National Children's Hospital Center.

Keep connected. Maintaining social networks can foster a sense of normality, and provide valuable outlets for sharing feelings and relieving stress. If officials have recommended limiting your social contact to contain an outbreak, you can stay connected via social media sites, e-mail and telephone.

Seek additional help. If you have intense feelings of anxiety or hopelessness or are having trouble performing your job or other daily activities, a licensed mental health professional such as a psychologist can help you develop an appropriate strategy for moving forward. You can find psychologists near you by contacting your state psychological association or through APA's psychologist locator.

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