

Integrative Approaches to Prevent and Treat the Swine Flu

By Jeremiah M Stevens, ND

The news is abuzz with stories surrounding the new strain of the flu. Popularly called the Swine flu, the H1N1 flu virus has caused fears of a potential global pandemic. People are concerned and want to know what can be done to treat and/or prevent an infection.

Is the fear, however, warranted? At this point we are not sure. This virus is a mutated form combining elements from numerous different flu strains. This process has created a novel virus that our immune systems have never seen before. This has a potential to cause problems for humans as it could possibly spread rapidly and be fatal. It is important to remember that the regular seasonal flu tends to kill approximately 36,000 individuals in the United States every year. The populations most affected are the very young, the elderly, and the immuno-compromised. What caught the attention of disease experts with this new flu was that it was killing persons in the prime of life. As of September 3, 2009, there have been just over 9000 hospitalizations because of H1N1 flu and 593 confirmed cases in the United States.

The fear may be justified, as global pandemics of the flu have been catastrophic in the past. The most significant flu pandemic was the Spanish Flu in 1918. The global mortality rate from the 1918 pandemic is not known, but it was estimated that 20% or more of the world population were infected to some extent and that approximately 30 to 50 million people worldwide, and 500,000 Americans, were killed. In 1957, an Asian flu pandemic infected some 45 million Americans and killed 70,000. Eleven years later, lasting from 1968 to 1969, the Hong Kong flu pandemic afflicted 50 million Americans and caused 33,000 deaths. The last swine flu epidemic occurred in 1976, when about 500 soldiers became infected over a period of a few weeks.

Isolated cases of swine flu have occurred periodically when a person who is around pigs gets the virus and becomes ill. This 2009 swine flu appears to be different in that it seems able to be spread from person to person. Like seasonal flu, this new virus appears to be able to spread through saliva and respiratory droplets from coughing or sneezing. The virus can live up to 12 or more hours on surfaces that an ill person has touched after touching their mouth, eyes, or nose and be passed to someone who touches this surface.

The symptoms of H1N1 flu from early reports are similar to regular seasonal flu symptoms: fever, cough, sore throat, runny or stuffy nose, body aches, headache, chills and fatigue. A significant number of people who have been infected with this virus also have reported diarrhea and vomiting. Severe illnesses and death has occurred as a result of illness associated with this virus. To confirm a case of swine flu, a respiratory sample must be collected in the first 4-5 days and tested for the virus.

At this point, the best prevention is to avoid contact with known or suspected cases, washing hands regularly, not touching hands to face, and sneezing and coughing into one's sleeve instead of hands. An element that I feel is important that has not been discussed in the media much is the importance of taking care of one's self to boost our immune system to be able to fight off an exposure more effectively. Eating well, sleeping regularly, exercising, and taking regular vitamins are ways to keep your system in the best possible shape and become even more important when a potential infectious agent is around.

Two herbs have been used historically as preventative immune support agents that we recommend regularly are astragalus and elderberry. Astragalus is a Chinese herb that is regularly put in soup pots and teas in China in the winter time to boost immunity. It is a very safe herb, with very little toxicity and can be used long-term. Elderberry, sold under the name Sambucol and others, is another herb with evidence showing its usefulness in preventing colds and flus. It is a berry related to blueberries and huckleberries and is safe for use in all ages, including children. It grows wild around here in the summer time and people will make their own medicinal products or purchase store brands.

There is currently no vaccine for the H1N1 flu, although one is in the works. We should take a cautionary tale from the last time the swine flu threatened in 1976. With fears of a pandemic, a vaccine was created. The pandemic never came and the only people sickened were some unfortunate individuals who reacted badly to the vaccine. In any case, any vaccine would be months away.

If someone feels they may have contracted the H1N1 flu, there are things that may help. Currently, the CDC is recommending one of two drugs: oseltamivir (Tamiflu) or zanamivir (Relenza). These medications generally need to be started in the first 48 hours of onset of symptoms to be most effective. While these medications are effective, they are not without reported side effects. Antibiotics may also be helpful if secondary bacterial infections occur. The flu can lead to a person eventually developing a bacterial pneumonia, bronchitis, sinus infection, or others. Some people speculate that many of the fatalities in the 1918 flu pandemic were due to secondary bacterial infections that we could now treat with antibiotics.

Alternative treatments for the flu exist as well. The two herbs mentioned above can also be used to help after a virus has set in. Other substances known to have antiviral activity are garlic, zinc, propolis, licorice root, and reishi mushrooms. Sweating has been used for thousands of years all around the world for colds and flus, and saunas, steam rooms, and hot baths are ways to get a good sweat going.

Probably the one complementary treatment that has been most successful with the flu has been homeopathy. In the 1918 Spanish Flu pandemic, homeopathic hospitals (yes, they did have homeopathic hospitals back then) had a much higher success rate than conventional hospitals. One published study from Ohio had the death rate at conventional hospitals at 28.2% (with a total of 24,000 cases) while the death rate at homeopathic hospitals was only 1.05% (with a total of 26,000 cases). This difference was remarkable and points to the effectiveness of homeopathy in treating the flu. I have used homeopathic medicines numerous times with the seasonal flu with great success, with patients often feeling better and back to work in a day or two. There is no reason to think that homeopathy won't work with the most recent strain of the flu.

One easy way to use homeopathy is to use the anti-flu formula called Oscilloccinum available at health food stores. This product, if taken at the first sign of symptoms, can often prevent a flu from developing further. Only a few pellets dissolved under the tongue are needed and it can be repeated several times in the first 2 days. If symptoms do progress, a homeopathic medicine to match the total symptoms is needed. There is approximately 10-15 homeopathic medicines we use for the flu, so it is best to see a doctor who practices homeopathy. The top 4 we use probably are:

Gelsemium: this remedy is often used early in the process, when the person is weak, tired and aches throughout the body. The person is very cold, the cough is hard and painful, and there is sneezing with burning discharge. The person only wants to lie around and is apathetic about life.

Bryonia: the trouble here is largely bronchial and going down. When a person is very grumpy and feels miserable with the flu, wanting only to lie still and be left alone, this remedy is likely to be useful. Headache, muscle aches, cough, or stomach pain may be the major symptoms. Everything feels worse from even the slightest motion. The person's mouth usually is dry, with a thirst for cold drinks.

Arsenicum album: chills with flushes of heat and runny nose predominate. The discharge is irritating and corrosive, the throat is inflamed and spotty, and there is great hardness and tenderness of the glands. The person is restless, often tossing and turning and is very cold and wanting heat. Anxiety is also present and everything is worse around 12 – 1 am. The person is thirsty for sips of cold water.

Eupatorium perfolatum: is the remedy when soreness and aching of the entire body predominate. The pains feel like they are deep in the bones, like they are breaking. There is often hoarseness and cough, with great soreness of the larynx and upper respiratory tract. The cough is a very shattering one, hurts the head and chest and the patient holds the chest with the hands.

If you are going to try to treat yourself, match as many symptoms as possible, including the mental symptoms if present. A couple pellets of a 30C under the tongue up to three times in 24 hours. If no improvement, the medicine was probably not correct and a new one should be tried or consult with a homeopath. Gelsemium, Bryonia, and Eupatorium were the ones most used successfully in the 1918 epidemic and corresponded to three stages of the disease process with that particular virus.

While we are not sure whether this current flu will develop into a global pandemic, it is good to know that there are treatments, both conventional and alternative, to help prevent and treat the flu. At this point, I recommend cautiously watching the reports, but not wasting a lot of energy worrying because, as studies have shown, worry actually decreases immune function making someone more susceptible to viral infections. Instead try to spend time laughing, playing, and being grateful – all of which have been shown to improve immune function.

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