

UPDATE 2-WHO chief says swine flu has pandemic potential

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- * WHO emergency committee to advise on changing alert level
- * All countries urged to be vigilant for unusual cases
- * Premature to issue travel advisories, WHO head says
- * Too soon to switch to production of new flu vaccine

By Stephanie Nebehay

GENEVA, April 25 (Reuters) - Outbreaks of [swine flu](#) in Mexico and the United States have the potential to cause a worldwide pandemic but it is too early to say whether they will, the head of the World Health Organisation said on Saturday.

WHO director-general Margaret Chan urged health authorities in all countries to be on high alert for unusual patterns of disease and any rise in severe flu or pneumonia cases.

"This is clearly an animal strain of the H1N1 virus and it has pandemic potential because it is infecting people," Chan said on a teleconference.

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

The United Nations health agency has warned for several years that a new virus strain could spark a human influenza pandemic that could sweep around the globe and kill millions.

The new H1N1 flu strain -- a mixture of swine, human and avian flu viruses which has killed up to 68 people among 1,004 suspected cases in Mexico and infected eight in the United States -- is still poorly understood and the situation is evolving quickly, Chan said.

There were currently no indications of similar outbreaks elsewhere in the world, she said.

"It would be prudent for health officials within countries to be alert to outbreaks of influenza-like illness or pneumonia, especially if these occur outside in months outside the usual peak influenza season," added Chan, a former health director of Hong Kong.

Health officials worldwide should also be alert to large incidences of severe or fatal flu-like illness in groups other than young children and the elderly, the ages usually at highest risk from normal seasonal flu, she said.

Most of the dead in Mexico were aged between 25 and 45.

WHO experts have been deployed in Mexico to help health authorities with disease surveillance, laboratory diagnosis and clinical management of cases.

The WHO stood ready with antivirals to combat the outbreaks in Mexico. But authorities have a sizeable supply of Tamiflu, known generically as oseltamivir, and made by Switzerland's Roche Holding ([ROG.VX](#)), which has proved effective against the new virus, according to the WHO.

"NOTORIOUSLY UNPREDICTABLE"

"Influenza viruses are notoriously unpredictable and full of surprises, as we are seeing right now," Chan said.

"We need to know how the virus is spread, what is the transmission pattern and whether or not it is going to cause severe disease and in what age group," she said.

An emergency committee of 15 experts was meeting on Saturday to advise her about any "temporary measures" to protect international health or whether to recommend a change in the WHO's pandemic alert level, currently 3 on a scale of 1 to 6.

It was "too premature at this stage" for the WHO to announce any travel advisories, as better analysis of the cases and other clinical data was required, she said. But the experts would address the issue of travel advisories.

"We do not yet have a complete picture of the epidemiology or the risk, including possible spread beyond the currently affected areas," Chan said.

"Nonetheless, in the assessment of WHO, this is a serious situation which must be watched very closely."

It was also too soon for the U.N. agency to advise drugmakers to switch to producing a new vaccine -- to be derived from the new virus -- from their traditional production of seasonal influenza vaccines, she said. (For other stories on swine flu click on [nFLU]) (For WHO information on swine flu go to: [here](#)) (Editing by Mark Trevelyan)

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