

Swine flu: Govt fears surge, announces fresh guidelines

The health ministry on Tuesday said that August marked the start of the country's six-month long seasonal influenza period during which time the deadly H1N1 influenza virus would spread faster among people.

The WHO has already designated the present outbreak of H1N1 as the planet's fastest-moving pandemic. The virus has spread as much in less than six weeks as past pandemic flu viruses spread in more than six months.

Jolted by India's first death due to H1N1 in Pune added with strong fears that the number of people with flu like symptoms would increase by over 10 times in the next few weeks, the health ministry on Tuesday modified its testing guidelines that would make largescale sample collection, its testing and subsequent isolation of H1N1 positive cases simpler.

Joint secretary Vineet Chaudhury said, "With the seasonal influenza season setting in with the consequence that many more people would report sick with symptoms and would require to be tested, we have made testing guidelines simpler."

According to the new guidelines, testing for H1N1 will only be done in designated government health facilities. Private hospitals or labs cannot test patients for H1N1. It will also be mandatory for only those patients with severe flu like symptoms to get hospitalised. Those who show mild flu symptoms and whose swab tests later test positive for H1N1 influenza will be given the option of being treated at home rather than getting admitted in a hospital.

Chaudhury said, "Under the new guidelines, any person with flu like symptoms such as fever, cough, sore throat, cold and running nose will have to go only to a designated government facility for testing.

After clinical assessment, the designated medical officer will decide whether the symptoms require sample collection and testing. Once samples are collected, the patient will be allowed to go home (this was not allowed under the existing guidelines).

The sample of the suspect case will be sent to the notified laboratory for testing. If tested as positive for H1N1 and in case the symptoms are mild, the patient will be informed and given the option of admission to hospital or isolation and treatment in his/her own home.

In case the patient opts for home isolation and treatment, he/she will be provided with detailed guidelines and safety measures that need to be strictly adhered to by the entire household of the patient.

The family will then have to provide full contact details of the entire household. The household and social contacts of the infected patient will then be administered with a prophylaxis case of Tamiflu.

Chaudhury said, "We are expecting a large number of people to report with flu like symptoms in the next few months. People are also apprehensive about getting tested. We will therefore allow patients to go home until tests show they are severe."

He added, "A patient has the right to go to hospital to get tested. But patients don't have the right to demand for a test if the doctor there feels is unnecessary. A negative test costs the government Rs 5,000 per sample and a positive test costs Rs 10,000 per sample. The decision of the doctor will be final."

The present guidelines stipulate the patient needs to be kept in an isolation facility in a hospital while the samples are being tested. There is however no change in the guidelines meant for passengers arriving at airports with flu like symptoms.

The central government plans to call a meeting of major private hospitals and medical practitioners on Sunday to sensitise them about H1N1. "We don't want a repeat of the Pune incident," Chaudhry said.