

SWINE FLU: NO NEED TO PANIC DURING HAJJ SEASON

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Swine origin influenza; an H1N1 virus [S-OIV] is recently discovered to cause a viral infection which created havoc worldwide. It originated in Mexico and United States in early April 2009. As its name suggests it is genetically closer to those viruses found in swine. Within few weeks of initial reports, the virus spread in about 30 countries through human-to-human transmission. In the second week of June 2009, H1N1 virus infected 17,410 people and 115 deaths in about 62 countries. The majority of the cases so far have been in Mexico [5029 with 97 deaths], USA [8975 with 15 deaths] and Canada [1336 with 2 deaths].¹ As per WHO report released on Sept 30, 2009, the number of swine flu cases approached three hundred thousand with mortality of four thousand all over the world.²

In Muslim world fear has been generated that during Hajj season swine flu will rapidly spread. Saudi Arabia's total population is about 27 million, and the reported cases of swine flu are 9,000 [0.003%] and 39 [0.43%] deaths from the disease have been reported to date. It is important to mention that during the holy month

of Ramdan [August-September, 2009] only 26 cases [0.0013%] of infections among two million pilgrims were discovered.³

H1N1 2009 influenza virus infection manifests itself identical to common flu with major clinical findings including cough, fever, sore throat, runny nose, fatigue, headache, body aches, chills, malaise and some time patients may also complain of vomiting and diarrhea.⁴

It is mainly afflicting children less than two years of age, elderly patients [age > 65 years], and immuno-compromised subjects are also vulnerable to its complications.⁵ The chances of its complications are increased in patients who have superimposed H1N1 infection on the already underlying conditions including pregnancy, cardio-pulmonary diseases, diabetes mellitus, liver diseases and malignancy.¹

Having said all that about the horrifying "swine flu", it is quite important to examine the situation in perspective of seasonal flu as well. Mexico City, where this new strain of virus (S-OIV) originated is a one of the most populous metropolitan, comprising 22 million inhabitants. A total of reported cases were 22000 constituting only 0.1% of the total population. An ordinary strain of influenza inflicts around 200000 (1% of the population, 10 times more than the swine flu), cases during few months of winter each year and mortality is around 36,000 each year. In USA alone, the estimated deaths due to seasonal influenza-associated complications could reach up to fifty thousand.⁶

The seasonal flu attack rates are far higher than H1N1. Certainly, influenza in its own class has the potential ability to infect enormous number of humans in a limited period of time, but so far with H1N1 in 2009 we are not even close to that level and the panic generated does

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not look justified. During Hajj about 2.5 million of worshipers from all over the world gather in close proximity at two holy cities [Makkah and Madina] to perform the Hajj, therefore, keeping in view the current available literature though preventive measure must be adopted but there is no need to get panic about likely situation during Hajj season, as it is being over publicized rather than an actual illness.

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