

World 'getting closer' to swine flu pandemic: WHO

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The world is "getting closer" to a swine flu pandemic as the virus shows early signs of spreading locally in countries outside the Americas, a senior World Health Organisation official said Tuesday.

"Globally we believe that we are at phase five but are getting closer to phase six," said Keiji Fukuda, WHO assistant director-general, referring to the agency's six-level pandemic alert system.

Phase five signals that a pandemic is imminent. The world would be in an official pandemic, marking global spread, at phase six.

"It is clear that the [virus](#) continues to spread internationally. We know there are a number of countries that appear to be in transition moving from travel-related cases to established, more established, community-type spread," said Fukuda.

He noted in particular that countries like Britain, Spain Japan, Chile and Australia are showing larger numbers of [influenza](#) A(H1N1) infections, "with some early spread into communities."

Some 18,965 cases of infections including 117 deaths have been reported to the WHO by 64 countries around the world.

A criteria for the WHO to move the highest six alert would be established community spread in a country outside the first region in which the disease was initially reported, in this case, outside the

Americas.

"However, we still are waiting for really widespread community activity in these countries. So I think it's fair to say that they are in transition and are not quite there yet, that's why we are not in phase six yet," said Fukuda.

Other than geographical spread, some member states most affected by swine [flu](#) have urged the WHO to integrate an assessment of the disease's severity into its criteria for moving up the alert scale and for caution before declaring a pandemic.

Fukuda said the WHO is developing ways to assess the severity of the disease.

WHO officials said last month they were taking into account issues such as the severity of the virus, possible changes in the pattern of illness, its impact on poor countries or circulation in the southern hemisphere where it could mix with seasonal flu.

But Fukuda said Tuesday that the overall swine flu situation could be described as "moderate" rather than "mild" even though a majority of patients have reported mild symptoms.

This is because "we do not have a full handle on the number of people with serious illnesses," he added.

The WHO is looking at providing more tailored guidance to member states on actions to be taken if a pandemic is declared.

"One of the things we hope to do by providing this kind of guidance is to help reduce some of the more drastic actions which may be uncalled for," he said, citing as examples trade embargoes imposed on pork by

some countries.

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