

Britain's swine flu advice confuses public

July 20 2009, By MARIA CHENG , AP Medical Writer

(AP) -- As swine flu continues to spread in Britain, health officials are telling people to avoid travel and crowded places, and even advising women to delay getting pregnant until the virus subsides.

Critics say the advice risks confusing the public and that it is an overreaction to a [virus](#) that so far remains mild.

Since swine flu was declared a pandemic, or global outbreak, by the [World Health Organization](#) in June, Britain's response has swung between claims the virus was not spreading widely to predicting there could be 100,000 new cases a day by the end of August.

On Sunday, Britain's Department of Health recommended people with flu-like symptoms delay their holidays. Officials also said travelers should take medicine with them and avoid public places if they get sick. But since people with swine flu often are contagious before they even have symptoms, it is unclear if that advice would slow the virus' spread.

"You shouldn't rearrange your life around the virus at this point," said Gregory Hartl, a spokesman for the World Health Organization. Most people who get swine flu, also known as H1N1, only experience mild symptoms and don't need any treatment to get better.

Even now, during the summer vacation period, WHO does not recommend any travel-related measures to prevent the spread of swine flu, which it has described as "unstoppable."

Britain's Health Secretary Andy Burnham denied the government's response to the outbreak had been confusing and said the health service had dealt "fantastically well" with the virus, which has hit Britain harder than any other European country.

But politicians from Britain's opposition Liberal Democrats say that governmental infighting has delayed the launch of a national swine flu hot line, which has yet to begin operating.

Britain's Department of Health recommended that "it may be sensible for those trying for children to consider delaying conception whilst the pandemic is going on." Pandemics typically last several years.

Pregnant women are at higher risk of complications from swine flu, since pregnancy weakens women's immune systems. Pregnant women are also advised to avoid crowded places if possible.

But some experts wonder if the advice to avoid crowded places makes sense. "We have very little or no evidence that being in crowds actually puts you at increased risk," said John Edmunds, a professor of infectious disease modeling at the London School of Hygiene and Tropical Medicine.

Edmunds said it was possible closer contact was needed to catch the virus, and that there was little proof that avoiding busy locales actually reduced one's chances of infection.

In recent weeks, public fears about swine flu have been heightened by estimates issued by British health officials, who predicted that 100,000 people might get swine flu every day by the end of August, and that 75,000 people might die in the outbreak.

"About the only thing we know about these numbers is that they will be

wrong," Edmunds said. He said it was too early in the [outbreak](#) to accurately predict how many people might fall sick or die.

Hartl said WHO wasn't surprised by the wide-ranging advice issued in response to the [swine flu](#) pandemic.

"There's always going to be a pendulum swing of reactions. That's just part of human nature," he said.

He added that while the virus remains mild, it was important to stay vigilant. "Viruses can mutate and can become more pathogenic," he said. "If this gets more serious, then all bets are off."

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