

Canadian contracts H1N1 variant after contact with pigs

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OTTAWA (Reuters) - A Canadian man has been infected with an H1N1 variant influenza virus after having had close contact with pigs, a senior health official for the province of Ontario said on Tuesday.

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"I would like to reassure Ontarians that this variant influenza virus rarely spreads from animals to humans. Subsequent human-to-human transmission is also rare," Arlene King, Ontario's chief medical officer of health, said in a statement. An influenza virus that normally circulates in animals is referred to as a variant virus when it infects humans. In such cases it is labeled H1N1v.

"I would also like to stress that this is not a food safety issue; the consumption of properly cooked pork continues to be safe. Proper cooking of meats, including pork, kills all bacteria and viruses," King said.

H1N1 is a swine flu virus responsible for a pandemic in 2009 that began in the United States and Mexico and spread around the world in six weeks. It rocked the global pork trade when about a dozen countries temporarily restricted Canadian pork imports after the virus spread to a pig farm in the province of Alberta.

"The identification of this case is the result of the strength of our current surveillance system here in Ontario," King said. "It is not an unexpected occurrence, and there have been a number of human infections with variant influenza viruses in the United States over the past year."

The Canadian resident is being treated in a hospital in southwestern Ontario.

Tori Gass, a spokeswoman for the Ontario health ministry said he recently came into contact with swine in Canada and the United States, but officials are still investigating where he would have contracted the virus.

Canadian Agriculture Minister Gerry Ritz said in an interview that the government would take steps to reassure its export markets. Canada is the world's biggest exporter of live hogs, mostly to the United States, and the third-largest pork shipper.

"The biggest thing is we always tell people in Canada our food supply is safe, and the Americans work with us in that regard," Ritz said. "We're very much integrated when it comes to the meat sectors back and forth across our borders. We work together on these issues all the time."

The case is unlikely to cause the same backlash against Canada by pork importers that it did in 2009, said Martin Rice, executive director of the Canadian Pork Council.

"H1N1 sends off alarm bells in certain people's minds simply because of their recollection, but by no means is this looked at as something that will evolve into a big health undertaking that would have implications for trade," he said.

(Reporting by Randall Palmer in Ottawa and Rod Nickel in Winnipeg, Manitoba; editing by James Dalgleish, Gary Crosse)

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