



Everyday questions regarding the swine flu

Put the words "swine" and "flu" together and you generate all kinds of confusing questions in people's minds. Fears of the virus otherwise known as the 2009 H1N1 virus led to widespread slaughtering of pigs in Egypt last spring and a Chinese ban on importing U.S. pork that was finally canceled a couple of weeks ago.

Question: Are pigs passing the H1N1 virus to people?

Answer: To date, there is no known transfer of the virus from animals to people. However, people have passed the virus to animals such as pigs and turkeys. Humans, by far, represent the major reservoir for this virus. If pigs could talk, they would call this the human flu that can infect pigs.

Q: Can handling or eating pork infect a person with the 2009 H1N1 virus?

A: This virus infects the respiratory system, not the muscle tissues. Consequently, a pork roast would not contain the virus. Even if it did, normal cooking destroys any virus present. Adding to the safety of pork meat is the fact that only healthy animals can be slaughtered for food, and pig farmers keep sick people away from their pigs for obvious

reasons.

Q: If turkeys can get the H1N1 virus, is Thanksgiving dinner safe?

A: Yes. Don't worry about your Thanksgiving turkey. Just like pork, turkey meat does not carry the virus. Also, sick turkeys are not used for food. Consequently, like pig farmers, turkey farmers keep sick people away from their flock.

Q: Are people avoiding pork products?

A: Frequently people make their food decisions based on fear, and this would appear to be the case with pork. The swine flu scare has resulted in people purchasing less pork. Consequently, you may have noticed the cost of pork is down.

Q: What are the nutritional benefits of pork?

A: Over the past couple of decades, pork has gradually become a much leaner meat. This has progressed to the point that U.S. pork is now one of the leanest meats available. Pork tenderloin is the leanest cut of pork and has slightly less fat and fewer calories than skinless chicken breast. A pork chop is also leaner than you might think, having fewer calories and less fat than skinless chicken thigh. In addition, pork is a good source of high-quality protein and

is especially rich in B vitamins.

Worldwide, people eat pork more than any other meat. In Hawaii, pork that is prepared kalua style in an imu is thoroughly cooked and, consequently, safe to eat.

According to the Centers for Disease Control, the most effective ways to avoid the flu include vaccination and avoidance of virus exposure by frequent hand washing with soap and water or alcohol-based hand rubs. Also, do not touch your eyes, nose and mouth unless your hands have been washed thoroughly.

The bottom line on pigs is summarized well by a quote from Halina M. Zaleski, animal scientist and swine specialist at the University of Hawaii at Manoa: "People with 2009 H1N1 flu have infected people, pigs (Minnesota and Indiana), turkeys (Canada and Chile), ferrets (Nebraska and Oregon) and a cat (Iowa). Animals, on the other hand, have not infected people. Conclusion: Enjoy your pork and turkey, but stay away from people!"

Joannie Dobbs, PhD, CNS and Alan Titchenal, PhD, CNS
are nutritionists in the Department of Human Nutrition, Food and Animal Sciences,
College of Tropical Agriculture and Human Resources, UH-Manoa.
Dr. Dobbs also works with the University Health Service.
