

Addressing H1N1 Influenza Outbreak

Why in news?

In a short span the number of influenza A (H1N1) cases and deaths reported from India has been increased.

What are the concerns of H1N1?

- Influenza (H1N1) virus is the subtype of influenza A virus that was the most common cause of human influenza (flu).
- Influenza viruses infect the cells in the nose, throat and lungs.
- The virus enter one's body when he inhale contaminated droplets or transfer live virus from a contaminated surface to your eyes, nose or mouth.
- Influenza complications include:
 1. Worsening of chronic conditions, such as heart disease and asthma.
 2. Pneumonia.
 3. Neurological signs and symptoms, ranging from confusion to seizures.
 4. Respiratory failure.
- H1N1 flu is also known as swine flu, it is called swine flu because in the past, the people who caught it had direct contact with pigs.
- That changed several years ago, when a new virus emerged that spread among people who hadn't been near pigs.
- From 2009 till 2010 World Health Organization (WHO) declared the new strain of swine-origin H1N1 as a pandemic.

What is the status of H1N1 in India?

- The H1N1 virus, which caused a pandemic in 2009, has since become a seasonal flu strain globally, including in India, and causes fewer deaths.
- But recently it has been found that in a short span of 55 days (till February 24) this year, the number of influenza A (H1N1) cases and deaths reported from India reached an alarming 14,803 and 448, respectively.
- While Rajasthan and Gujarat had the highest number of deaths, at 137 and 88, respectively, Delhi recorded seven deaths despite recording around the same number of cases as Gujarat.
- The number of cases reported till February 24 is nearly the same as that recorded in the whole of 2018 (14,992).

- At about 450, the number of deaths till February 24 is nearly half the total reported in 2018 (1,103).
- The actual number of cases and deaths this year is likely to be higher as West Bengal has not reported the data to the Integrated Disease Surveillance Programme.

What are the issue with government's action?

- Union Health Ministry had reviewed the preparedness and action taken by States to deal with influenza cases when the number of H1N1 cases and deaths stood at 6,701 and 226, respectively.
- Despite the number of cases and deaths more than doubling in a short span the Ministry has made no additional effort to contain the spread.
- It has issued a guidance "recommending" vaccines for health-care workers, and deeming them "desirable" for those above 65 years of age and children between six months and eight years.
- Surprisingly, people with pre-existing chronic diseases, who are most susceptible to H1N1 complications according to the WHO, have been ignored.

What measures are needed?

- With H1N1 becoming a seasonal flu virus strain in India even during summer, it is advisable that health-care workers and others at risk get themselves vaccinated.
- Despite the sharp increase in cases and deaths, the vaccine uptake has been low.
- Besides vaccination, there needs to be greater awareness so that people adopt precautionary measures such as frequent handwashing, and cough etiquette.

Source: The Hindu