Influenza outbreak – H1N1

Why in news?

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Several Indian states are facing another deadly outbreak of H1N1 influenza, otherwise known as swine flu.

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What is swine flu?

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- Swine flu, also known as the H1N1 virus, is a relatively new strain of an influenza virus that causes symptoms similar to the regular flu.
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- The H1N1 infection was originally transmitted through contact with pigs, but now it can be spread from person to person.
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- Its symptoms, which include fever, coughing, a sore throat, and body ache, are similar to the regular flu.
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- But if not treated, the H1N1 infection can lead to more serious conditions, including pneumonia and lung infections.
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- The risks are especially high for children under the age of five and the elderly.
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Which are the affected areas?

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- According to a report by the Press Trust of India, as many as 2,572 cases of swine flu were recorded across India and at least 77 people have died, as of Jan 24, 2018.
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- The latest data available on the website of the National Centre for Disease

Control shows that 49 people died within the first two weeks of the year.
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- The worst hit is the western state of Rajasthan, where over 1,500 people have tested positive for swine flu and the death toll is now at 56.
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- The state government has launched screening camps and is going door-to-door to raise awareness about the disease.
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- However, a lack of testing facilities in the state means that those who have contracted the disease are likely to infect many others before they are diagnosed.
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- Also, delays in treatment are putting the lives of thousands at risk.
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- H1N1 influenza cases were also reported in Delhi, Gujarat, Haryana and Telangana.
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- With the latest outbreaks, Indian states have been put on high alert and tasked with raising awareness about the disease and its risks.
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What was the measure taken by the government in the past?

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- The quadrivalent vaccine for active immunisation of adults of age 18 to 64 years was approved in May 2018 by the Drug Controller General of India (DCGI).
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- For years, flu vaccines were designed to protect against three different flu viruses (trivalent vaccines).
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- Trivalent vaccines include an influenza A (H1N1) virus, an influenza A (H3N2) virus and one influenza B virus.
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- However, the quadrivalent flu vaccine will contain four influenza virus strains (two influenza A subtypes and two influenza B subtypes — H1N1 and H3N2, and Victoria and Yamagata respectively).
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- The viruses used in the vaccine are killed and this eliminates the possibility of the virus in the vaccine itself causing infection.
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- However, most public health programmes are not prepared for a mass

adoption of this vaccine.
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- There are also reports of non-availability of sufficient doses of quadrivalent vaccine.
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What should be done?

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- If a vaccine has proven efficacy in reducing the burden of seasonal influenza, it must be made part of the public health system.
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- Thus, through an umbrella scheme such as Ayushman Bharat, the quadrivalent vaccine should be made available to the affected people using public and private institutions.
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- Large-scale vaccination covering high- risk groups such as health workers, people with lung, kidney, liver and heart disease, diabetics and the elderly could also reduce the impact of the viruses.
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- Campaigns to educate the public through mass media ahead of the season, especially on respiratory etiquette and risk reduction, can help cut transmission.
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- At the same time, upgrading existing vaccines requires a consistent effort to track viral mutations that take place periodically, and communicate the information to researchers through open access databases.
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- There are 41 Virus Research Diagnostic Laboratories in India and they can study the nature of infections to provide genetic insights to peer scientists.
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- This can help subsequently in developing vaccines and remedies.
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- When it comes to treatment, the availability of anti-viral drugs such as Oseltamivir in the public health system should be ensured.
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- According to the WHO, seasonal influenza will continue to resurface.
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- Thus, India must prepare for it with a comprehensive programme that covers all the States.
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Source: The Hindu

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