Rising H1N1 cases

What is the issue?

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The reported cases and deaths due to the spread of H1N1 virus are on the rise in comparison with previous years' records.

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What is H1N1?

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- Influenza A (H1N1) virus is the subtype of influenza A virus that was the most common cause of human influenza in 2009.
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- H1N1 flu is also known as swine flu caused by swine influenza virus that is endemic in pigs.
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- It is a highly contagious disease and can easily spread from a patient through saliva and mucus.
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What are the recent developments?

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- India is witnessing a new rise in the number of cases and deaths due to swine flu.
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- Gujarat is the worst-affected, followed by Rajasthan, Punjab, Maharashtra and Delhi.
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- The number of cases in the southern states is also high compared with last year, especially in Tamil Nadu.
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What is the reason?

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- Pune based National Institute of Virology has noted that the **virus has not undergone any significant mutation** directly responsible for the spread or increased mortality.
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- Also, the virulence or the disease causing nature has remained nearly unchanged.
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- However, the virus has undergone **point mutations**.
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- This has resulted in a **new strain called the Michigan strain** which has replaced the California strain which has been prevalent since the 2009 pandemic.
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- Only the Michigan strain is circulating this year as against the co-circulation of both strains last year.
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- While earlier **vaccinations made people immune to the California strain**, the circulation of the new strain is the cause of increased caseload and mortality.
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What is to be done?

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- **Vaccine** - After mutation, the newer strain emerges stronger than the earlier strain.
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- More research is needed to fully understand the epidemiology of H1N1 caused by the Michigan strain, and who may be more vulnerable.
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- Also, the composition of the swine flu vaccine will require changes as per the World Health Organization (WHO)s recommendation.
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- **Database** - The numbers in the official report do not reflect the true reality.
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- This is because it is not mandatory for the private hospitals to disclose all the deaths and the people affected, to the government’s database.
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- There is a need for a system to record and release the actual number of cases **for making appropriate response**.
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- **Prevention** - Being a communicable disease, swine flu can best be prevented with **awareness** generation by the governments.
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- Uptake of influenza vaccination by people, health-care workers and especially by those belonging to the high-risk category, can go a long way in reducing the cases.
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- High-risk categories include pregnant women, very young and old people, those who have had organ transplantation and those with certain underlying illnesses.
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- Government should ensure that there are enough **vaccines** in various health centres.
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- Also, it should take measures to keep the environment clean to address poor **hygiene and sanitation** being causes of swine flu.
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- **Diagnose** - Sufficient lab facilities to diagnose H1N1 cases among both hospitalised and non-hospitalised population is essential.
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- The government should do everything possible to take both preventive and curative measures to fight swine flu.
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Source: The Hindu

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