

Obese people face possible high risk of complications from Pandemic (H1N1) 2009

As many as 80% of people who have suffered severe complications from the Pandemic (H1N1) 2009 virus have had chronic underlying health problems, according to World Health Organization data.

One of these underlying health problems is obesity – especially **morbid obesity** - and those illnesses and diseases often linked to it, such as heart disease, high blood pressure, and type 2 diabetes.

Exacerbating this risk is the fact that many obese people are unaware they may have other underlying health problems, and thus may not know of their elevated risk of becoming seriously ill from the new flu virus.

Obesity is seen as a growing health challenge in Viet Nam.

A person is considered obese if they have a body mass index (BMI) equal to or higher than 30. A person is morbidly obese if their BMI is higher than 40. BMI is a simple index of weight-for-height that is universally used to classify obesity in adults.

A study published this month by the Centres for Disease Control (CDC) in the United States of America cites the cases of 10 people infected with the virus who were so ill they had to be put on ventilators. Nine of the 10 were either obese or extremely obese. Three of these people later died of their complications.

It was noted in the CDC study that carrying extra weight can compromise the lungs and therefore may make people more vulnerable to complications from the novel flu virus. Moreover, impaired breathing due to pressure on the chest and abdomen can restrict a person's ability to breathe, cough and aerate the lungs.

The study also revealed that five of the ten patients developed blood clots in their lungs, and six had kidney failure. Those complications had been seen before in some non-obese people with the new flu virus, but not usually such a high proportion.

With Pandemic (H1N1) 2009 expected to circulate in communities for months and possibly years to come, obese people are advised to try to lose weight to reduce any risks of complications from the virus.

The key factors to maintaining a healthy weight are:

- limit calories from saturated fats;
- increase consumption of fruit and vegetables, as well as legumes, whole grains and nuts;
- limit the intake of sugars; and
- increase physical activity - at least 30 minutes of regular, moderate-intensity activity on most days.

It is recommended that people with morbid obesity seek advice immediately if they develop influenza like symptoms, so that doctors have an early opportunity to assess if they are in need of particular or special treatment.

NOTE: The most effective way to protect yourself from Pandemic (H1N1) 2009 is to practice good hygiene. Hands should be washed frequently with soap and water, especially after coughing or sneezing and before eating and drinking.

Hands should also be washed before and after removing face-masks (for the sick, high-risk groups and health care workers). If no soap is available an alcohol-based hand-rub will suffice. Additionally, people not feeling unwell should stay at least one metre away from anyone who is coughing or sneezing, and avoid touching them. It is also advised that they avoid crowded areas.