

Find a 'flu friend'

As the number of cases of swine flu continues to rise, now is the time for people to identify family members or friends who could help them if they become unwell.

A 'flu friend' could be a relative, neighbour or friend who will be able to collect medicines, food and other supplies.

People who become unwell with flu like symptoms should telephone the National Pandemic Flu Service (NPFs) on 0800 1 513 100 or log on to www.direct.gov.uk/pandemicflu who will decide if antiviral medication is required. Antivirals prevent the flu virus from reproducing and may shorten the illness by a day and reduce the risk of complications.

Those who are deemed to have swine flu by the NPFs service will be given a voucher number and asked to arrange for a "flu friend" to pick up anti-viral drugs from a distribution point. They will be asked to bring ID for themselves and the flu sufferer to verify who they are.

No-one is duty bound to use the NPFs service. They can still contact their GP if they wish. If an antiviral is required and after talking through the process, the GP will provide a letter of request to a local site stocking the antiviral medication. A 'flu friend' should then collect that medication.

Anyone suffering from flu like symptoms should stay at home and not go out to pick up the medication themselves.

NHS Hastings and Rother and NHS East Sussex Downs and Weald – the two East Sussex primary care trusts – have established a network of pharmacies, dispensing GP practices and two centres where antiviral medication can be collected.

For the Ringmer area, the nearest antiviral collection points are at Lewes – a pharmacy and the Michael Hillman Centre at Lewes Victoria Hospital.

Anyone who becomes unwell and doesn't have a 'flu friend' should tell their GP who will be able to advise about alternative arrangements in place for people with no family or friends locally.

Chief executive Mike Wood said: "In the vast majority of cases of swine flu in the UK, people have generally experienced a mild illness. While antiviral medication will help relieve the symptoms, it is vitally important we all continue to try to protect ourselves and others from infection."

How you can help others

In addition to identifying their own 'flu friends', everyone should also consider becoming a 'flu friend' to a vulnerable person, such as the elderly and other who may live alone.

Some local groups are setting up flu friends' networks. People without a 'flu friend' could consider contacting the following organisations in their area:

- town or parish council
- local churches and other places of worship
- local community groups.

Everyone can reduce the risk of catching or spreading swine flu (and other infections) by maintaining good basic hygiene, such as always covering your nose and mouth with a tissue when coughing or sneezing, disposing of the dirty tissue promptly and carefully, and washing hands regularly.

No one with flu or flu like symptoms should go to their GP surgery or to a hospital as this may spread swine flu; call your GP who will be able to give an assessment over the phone.

For further information about swine flu, call the Swine Flu Information Line on 0800 1 513 513. Information is also available on the NHS Choices website at www.nhs.uk/.