

Argentina swine flu deaths double

Dramatic surge in number of fatalities reported, though authorities hope epidemic may now ebb

- [Rory Carroll](#), Latin America correspondent
- [guardian.co.uk](#), Wednesday 5 August 2009 19.38 BST
- [Article history](#)

Deaths from [swine flu](#) in [Argentina](#) have more than doubled to 337 in the past month, a rate which could see it soon overtake the United States as the worst affected country.

Figures released today showed a dramatic surge in deaths from the 137 reported on 14 July, according to the health ministry, though authorities believe the epidemic has peaked and will ebb with the passing of the southern hemisphere's winter.

Another 400 deaths are being studied as suspected cases of A(H1N1) swine-type flu.

"We have to say that given the epidemiological tendency it is very probable that the majority of those 400 deaths are from H1N1," said the deputy health minister, Maximo Diosque.

Swine flu had almost completely replaced normal seasonal flu, he added. Of 762,711 cases more than 700,000 - 93% - were swine flu.

Argentina now accounts for about a quarter of the world's reported death toll. If most of the suspected cases are confirmed as A(H1N1) the South American nation will overtake the US, which hcurrently has 353 confirmed deaths.

Argentina's neighbours have reported much lower fatalities: Chile 96; Brasil 92; Uruguay 25; and Paraguay 22. Mexico, which first reported the outbreak, has registered 146 deaths.

Today's announcement was another setback for Argentina's faltering economy. Tourism revenues have reportedly halved, with restaurants, theatres, tango halls and Patagonian ski resorts unusually quiet. Buenos Aires alone has lost £600m, according to its small business association.

Despite the death toll, authorities expressed optimism the worst was over. The epidemic spread so widely that by now there are now thought to be fewer vulnerable people left to infect. The numbers reporting flu symptoms have steadily dropped and beds have again become available in clinics and hospitals.

Restrictions introduced last month have been lifted. Schools, universities, cinemas, theatres and gymnasiums have re-opened and fewer people are wearing surgical masks.

The Catholic church had urged worshippers to sit far apart and to avoid handshakes during mass. Doctors advised people to not greet each other with a kiss and to not share *mate*, a herbal drink traditionally drunk from a straw and passed between friends.

It was not immediately clear if the updated death toll would prompt renewed restrictions. The good news from Argentina is that its strain has not mutated and turned especially deadly. Genetic sequencing shows its swine flu remains virtually identical to the strain seen in Mexico and the US, boosting chances that a single vaccine can work everywhere.

Medical experts have been relieved to see no signs of resistance to antiviral drugs even though the government distributed 2m courses of Tamiflu free to public hospitals. That suggests the drug will remain effective in northern hemisphere countries bracing for winter.

The British Foreign Office's travel advice, updated last month, does not urge Britons to stay away but warns that there is a risk of infection and financial cost. "Medical facilities are good, but can be expensive."

Brazil's government has advised against travel to Argentina and Chile.