

PANDEMIC FLU: THE FACTS

A flu pandemic occurs when a new influenza virus emerges among humans and spreads easily from person to person. Because the virus is new to humans, people have little or no immunity and the virus spreads worldwide.

Pandemics, while rare, are not new. In the 20th century there were three flu pandemics – in 1918, 1957 and 1968 – that combined killed more than 50 million people worldwide and almost a million people in the United States. The severity of disease and the number of deaths caused by each of these past pandemics varied but their impact, especially the 1918 pandemic, was considerable.

One new type of avian influenza, or “bird flu”, has raised great concern among scientists worldwide. As is common with avian influenza viruses, this new strain of avian influenza, called the H5N1 virus, spread among wild birds such as ducks and geese. However, it is now also spreading to domestic birds such as chickens in Asia, Europe and Africa, putting human health at risk. There have been cases of humans who have become ill by coming into close contact with infected poultry or surfaces

contaminated with secretions/excretions from infected birds. More than half of the humans known to be infected with the H5N1 virus have died.

So far, the spread of H5N1 virus from person to person has been very rare. However, influenza viruses have the ability to change, and health professionals are concerned that H5N1 viruses or some other avian strain of flu could change enough to spread easily from one person to another. This could start the next flu pandemic.

Pandemic flu IS NOT the same as seasonal flu or bird flu (avian).

With pandemic flu:

- People have little or no immunity;
- Symptoms may be more severe and complications more frequent than seasonal flu, even among healthy children and young adults;

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About Pandemic Flu



- The death rate is higher;
- There may be a major impact on society (for example, there may be restrictions on travel and closings of school and businesses in an effort to slow the transmission of the disease and there could be significant absenteeism in businesses, utility service providers, and other organizations).

Pandemic planning requires the participation of government at local, state and federal levels. It also demands the involvement of people and organizations not accustomed to responding to health crises.

Businesses, schools, other institutions and local communities are being urged to undertake pandemic preparedness planning, as are families and individuals.

The United States has developed a *National Strategy for Pandemic Influenza* to guide the country's preparedness and response to an influenza pandemic. Significant investments have been made to increase capacity to produce vaccines quickly and in large quantities. States and localities across the U.S. are working to finalize and test their pandemic influenza preparedness plans.

Recommendations For Families And Individuals Include:

- **Plan** for the possibility that some businesses and schools may be closed and public services – including transportation – may be disrupted.
- **Stockpile** a two-week supply of water, non-perishable foods and other necessities, and be sure you have prescription and nonprescription medicines on hand.
- **Maintain** lists of emergency contacts and important health information – including allergies and blood types – for all family members.
- **Stay healthy.** Eat well, exercise, and practice behaviors that limit the spread of germs: frequent handwashing, covering coughs and sneezes, and avoiding others when you or they are sick.



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