

## **Pandemic Influenza**

### **What is pandemic flu?**

Influenza, or "flu," viruses cause infections of the respiratory tract (breathing tubes and lungs). A pandemic is a global disease outbreak. A pandemic flu occurs when a new flu virus emerges in humans. This new human flu virus then begins to cause serious illness and the new flu virus spreads easily from person-to-person worldwide.

### **What is the difference between pandemic flu and seasonal flu?**

Every year, there are seasonal flu viruses that are spread from person-to-person and most people have some natural resistance against these viruses. A pandemic flu is a new flu virus that the human population has never been infected with before. People would have no or little natural resistance to a new pandemic flu virus.

### **Should I be concerned about a new pandemic flu?**

Many scientists believe it is a matter of time until the next influenza pandemic occurs. However, the timing and severity of the next pandemic cannot be predicted. Influenza pandemics occurred three times in the past century — the "Spanish Flu" in 1918-19, the "Asian Flu" in 1957-58, and the "Hong Kong Flu" in 1968-69.

### **Why is there concern about the H5N1 avian flu and pandemic flu?**

Many scientists and public health officials are concerned about the H5N1 virus and its affect on birds and humans. The current outbreaks of H5N1 avian flu virus in bird populations are the largest and most severe on record. Millions of birds have become infected and died from this avian H5N1 virus, and H5N1 has spread to many different countries in Asia, Europe, and Africa. A few hundred people have contracted the H5N1 virus after having close contact with infected birds; about half of whom have since died.

Scientists and public health officials are concerned that if the H5N1 virus changes, or "mutates," within a human it could become a new human flu virus that could easily be spread from person-to-person. If this change in the virus occurs, most humans would have no or little natural resistance to the disease and it could begin a new pandemic, or "global," flu outbreak within the human population.

### **Why won't the annual flu vaccine protect people against a pandemic flu?**

Flu vaccines are designed to protect people against specific flu viruses. Every year at the end of the normal flu season, new flu vaccine, or the "flu shot," is prepared based on changes in the common, seasonal flu viruses. A vaccine can only be produced when there is a virus identified. A pandemic flu vaccine cannot be produced until a new pandemic flu virus emerges

and is identified in the human population. When a pandemic flu virus has been identified, it could take at least 6 months to develop, test and produce a vaccine for people.

### **How would a pandemic flu affect communities and businesses?**

Because most people would have no or little natural resistance against a new pandemic flu virus, many people could become sick and would not be able to go to work or school. Many people could also stay at home to care for sick family members. Schools and businesses might close to try to prevent disease spread. Large group gatherings might be canceled. Public transportation might be limited. These are examples of challenges that local communities, schools, civic organizations, and businesses will have to work together on to plan for a pandemic response.

### **What can be done to protect people from a pandemic flu?**

In the event of a pandemic, or any other flu situation, certain public health measures may be important to help contain or limit the spread of infection as effectively as possible. The following actions could include:

- Isolating sick people in their homes, at hospitals, or other facilities,
- Identifying and quarantining exposed people,
- Closing schools and workplaces as needed,
- Canceling public events,
- Restricting travel,
- Treating sick and exposed people with vaccines or antiviral medication (if available)

In addition, people should protect themselves on a daily basis by:

- Covering their mouths when they sneeze or cough
- Washing their hands with soap and water frequently
- Using an alcohol-based hand sanitizer and wipes to disinfect their hands and common surfaces
- Stay home if they are sick so they can recover and so they do not infect other people

### **What is being done now to prepare for a pandemic flu outbreak?**

Federal, State, and local agencies are developing plans to prepare for, and respond to an outbreak of pandemic flu. Local community organizations, faith-based groups, businesses, schools, and private citizens can prepare for a pandemic flu. The Federal government has developed pandemic flu checklists to assist groups and individuals with preparing for a pandemic flu.

**To access the Federal Pandemic Flu Checklists and additional information regarding pandemic flu, please visit**

**[www.doh.wa.gov/panflu/](http://www.doh.wa.gov/panflu/) or [www.pandemicflu.gov](http://www.pandemicflu.gov)**