



## **FACT SHEET**

### **What is pandemic influenza?**

Influenza viruses cause infections of the respiratory tract (breathing tubes and lungs). In some persons, complications of influenza can be severe, including pneumonia.

Pandemic influenza is a global outbreak of disease from a new influenza A virus that is unlike past influenza viruses. Because people have not been infected with a similar virus in the past, most or all people will not have any natural immunity (protection) to a new pandemic virus.

### **How is a pandemic different from regular flu season?**

A pandemic flu is a new influenza virus that could be a much more serious flu virus than seen in a typical flu season. Different from the typical strains of flu, humans would have little or no natural resistance to a new strain of influenza. Also, there is a vaccine for seasonal flu, which is prepared each season against new variations of the seasonal influenza. There is no vaccine available at this time for a pandemic flu, and it is expected to take at least six months after a pandemic flu appears to develop a vaccine.

### **Why is pandemic influenza so serious?**

Because most or all people would not have immunity to a new pandemic virus, large numbers of persons around the world can be infected. If the pandemic virus causes severe disease, many people may develop serious illnesses.

Once a pandemic virus develops, it can spread rapidly causing outbreaks around the world. The U.S. Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) predicts that as much as 25% to 30% of the U.S. population could be affected.

### **Can pandemic flu be prevented?**

The City of Houston Department of Health and Human Services is working with federal, state, and other local government agencies to respond to pandemic influenza and to maintain essential health care and community services if an outbreak should occur. In fact, governments all around the



world are preparing for the possibility of a pandemic outbreak under the leadership of the World Health Organization.

It is not possible to prevent or stop a pandemic once it begins, but it can be slowed. A person infected with influenza virus can be contagious for 24 hours before the onset of symptoms, and for five days thereafter, making it extremely easy for the virus to spread rapidly to large numbers of people.

Although the federal government is stockpiling medical supplies and anti-viral drugs, no country in the world has enough anti-viral drugs to protect all of their citizens. Anti-viral drugs can be used to treat severe cases as long as there is a reasonable chance that the drugs might help save lives. Anti-viral drugs will also have to be prioritized for people who work in essential occupations, such as health care workers.

Other strategies for slowing the spread of a severe influenza outbreak could include temporarily closing schools, sports arenas, theaters, restaurants, taverns, and other public gathering places and facilities.

There currently is no vaccine to protect humans against a pandemic influenza virus because the pandemic virus has not yet fully developed. However, vaccine development efforts are under way to protect humans against a pandemic influenza virus that might develop from the current bird flu virus in Asia.

### **When is pandemic influenza A expected?**

Influenza pandemics occur naturally. There were three pandemics in the 20th century. The pandemic of 1918-19 was the most severe pandemic on record, in which 50 million or more persons around the world died, including approximately 650,000 Americans.

It is not possible to predict accurately when influenza pandemics will occur or how severe they will be. However, the current outbreak of avian influenza in Asia has influenza experts concerned that a pandemic is developing that may be severe.

### **Why does the current bird flu outbreak in Southeast Asia pose a risk of causing a pandemic influenza A outbreak in humans?**

New human influenza viruses arise from bird influenza viruses that then change to a form that can infect humans and spread readily from person to person. The current bird flu outbreak in Asia is caused by a type of influenza



A virus called "H5N1". The H5N1 outbreak among domestic chickens and ducks in Asia is widespread. Human infections and deaths due to the avian H5N1 virus have occurred, although the virus has at this time not developed the ability to pass easily from person to person and cause outbreaks in humans.

### **How is pandemic influenza spread?**

Pandemic influenza would be spread from person to person primarily through "respiratory secretions," the same way seasonal influenza viruses and other common respiratory infections spread. Respiratory secretions are virus-containing droplets (such as spit or mucous) that are spread when infected persons cough or sneeze. These droplets can then land on the surfaces of the mouth, nose, and throat of persons who are near (i.e., within 3 feet) the ill person. The virus may also be spread through contact with the infectious respiratory secretions on the hands of an infected person and other objects and surfaces. Adults can spread influenza virus one day before symptoms appear and up to five days after the onset of illness.

### **What are the symptoms of bird flu in humans?**

The reported symptoms of bird flu in humans have ranged from typical influenza-like symptoms (e.g., fever, cough, sore throat, and muscle aches) to eye infections (conjunctivitis), pneumonia, acute respiratory distress, viral pneumonia, and other severe and life-threatening complications.

### **Will the regular (seasonal) flu shot provide any protection against the pandemic influenza virus?**

Probably not. But the regular flu shot will protect you against the influenza viruses that are circulating right now.

### **What can the public do to reduce their risk of pandemic influenza?**

- Stop germs from spreading:
  - Stay home when you are sick.
  - Cover your mouth and nose with tissue when coughing and sneezing.
  - Wash your hands often. The key is to wash thoroughly with warm water, and to wash frequently.
  - When hand washing is not possible, use an alcohol based hand cleaner.



- Avoid touching your mouth, nose, and eyes.
- Visit the **U.S. Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC)** at <http://www.cdc.gov/flu/protect/stopgerms.htm> for more tips.
- Have a good home disaster preparedness plan. A good source of information is the Seattle/King County website at <http://www.metrokc.gov/prepare/preparerespond/prepared.aspx>.
- Check the CDC travel advisories at <http://www.cdc.gov/travel> if you plan to travel to Southeast Asia.
- Stay informed by checking out the websites listed below.

**Additional information can be found at:**

- **U.S. Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC)**  
<http://www.cdc.gov/flu/avian/index.htm>
- **U. S. Department of Health and Human Services Pandemic Flu - main website**  
<http://www.pandemicflu.gov/>
- **U. S. Department of Health and Human Services - free planning guides** include checklists and information on how to prepare for a potential pandemic.  
<http://www.pandemicflu.gov/plan/checklists.html>
- **National Institutes of Health** - information on the vaccine development process and other pandemic flu-related topics  
<http://www3.niaid.nih.gov/news/focuson/flu/default.htm>