

Influenza Pandemic

A pandemic is an epidemic that spreads rapidly around the world with high rates of illness and death. Although people are exposed to different strains of the flu virus every year, history has shown that, several times each century, entirely new flu strains develop. Because no one has had a chance to develop immunity to the new flu strain, it can spread rapidly and widely. If the changed virus causes serious illness and easily spreads from person to person, a pandemic can occur.

Pandemics are different than seasonal flu outbreaks. Seasonal flu outbreaks are caused by small changes in influenza viruses that people have already been exposed to. A new flu vaccine is developed each year to protect people against the expected changes in existing viruses. That's why annual flu shots are needed and are effective. But since an influenza pandemic is caused by an entirely new strain of flu virus, preparing a vaccine in advance is not as simple as it is for seasonal flu.

Currently there is concern about one strain of Avian influenza (bird flu), known as H5N1, because it is causing severe disease in wild birds, chickens, and other poultry in several continents. In some instances, people who have had close contact with sick poultry have also become infected, some have died. There is concern that H5N1 will be able to change so that it will be easily spread from birds to humans and then from human to human.

New York State, the state's local health departments and the federal government are actively involved in planning for the possibility of an influenza pandemic. The New York State Department of Health has developed an influenza pandemic plan and will update it as information and conditions change.

Effects of Pandemic Flu

Illness could be widespread. Some experts estimate that up to one-third of the world population could become sick during a pandemic. This would have serious effects. Services such as public transportation, communications, schools, businesses such as banks, stores and restaurants, utilities, and medical care could be disrupted. Hospitals may be unable to care for all the people who need medical attention. There may not be enough beds, staff or equipment available. As a result, people may be encouraged to treat themselves at home. Or stores may run out of supplies-and not be able to get deliveries for some time.

Be prepared

Being prepared is the best response to the threat of pandemic Flu. Experts do not know when it will occur until it starts. They also can't say how long it will last or how severe it will be. The severity of the pandemic will depend on the virus that causes it.

Simple steps to take right now:

- Understand how flu spreads

Flu germs are spread through coughs and sneezes by spraying droplets through the air, these droplets can be inhaled directly or picked from contaminated surfaces.

- Learn how to help prevent infection

Try to stay away from a person who is coughing or sneezing. Don't touch your eyes, nose or mouth. Wash your hands often to prevent any germs on your hands from getting into your body

- Practice healthy habits

To avoid spreading germs, stay home if you are sick. Keep your distance from others until you are well again. Practice cough and sneeze etiquette. Wash your hands often. Clean countertops, telephones and sinks. Don't share personal items. Practice food safety.

- Stay informed

If a pandemic strikes, the situation may change from day to day. The media will work with authorities to give information on current flu-related events, available services, signs and symptoms of an outbreak, actions to take to limit the effects of the flu, and what is projected for the future

- Prepare an emergency kit

Having supplies on hand will be useful if you need to stay home during a pandemic, or other kinds of emergencies. Brochures and other preparedness materials are available from:

The Federal Emergency Management Agency(FEMA): <http://www.fema.gov>

American Red Cross: <http://www.redcross.org>

- Be ready to cooperate with authorities in times of emergency

Common-good decisions are made by authorities to limit spread of disease in a community such as: closing schools and businesses, limit public gatherings and events, limit travel and request everyone stay home for a certain period.

Pandemic preparation plans:

The federal government is:

- Stockpiling vaccines and medications
- Supporting research to produce new vaccines and medications
- Establishing effective public health guidelines
- Monitoring viruses around the world
- Working to detect outbreaks and responding to them quickly
- Helping state, local and tribal authorities develop pandemic flu response plans
- Setting up systems for sharing emergency health information

For more information: www.pandemicflu.gov

Center for Disease Control: www.cdc.gov

U.S. Department of Homeland Security: www.ready.gov

World Health Organization: www.who.int

New York State's Plan includes:

- Strategies for mass immunization(vaccination)
- Increasing ability to continue essential services(such as medical care) and respond to developing problems(such as running low on food and water)
- Organizing cooperative efforts between law enforcement, utilities, public health personnel, local health-care organizations, hospitals, emergency management officials and elected officials

For more information: www.health.ny.us

