

Pandemic Influenza: *What it is – and what it isn't*

What is pandemic flu?

An influenza pandemic is a very large outbreak of flu, usually affecting the entire world. A pandemic can happen whenever there is a major change in the virus that causes flu.

Flu viruses change over time. That's why you need to get a flu shot every fall – to protect against the flu strains that will be around during the coming flu season. Usually these changes are gradual – this year's flu viruses won't be that different from last year's viruses.

But when a major change occurs, most people will have little or no immunity to the new virus. Unlike regular flu, one of these new "pandemic" viruses can show up any time of year, and we probably won't have a vaccine for it – at least not right away. Antiviral drugs may or may not work, and they may be in short supply. The resulting wave of illness can spread rapidly across the globe, making many millions of people ill.

Are we headed for a pandemic?

Sooner or later, yes. Pandemics have happened three times in the last century – in 1918, 1957 and 1968. The 1918 pandemic was the worst. It made a third of the population ill, killed tens of millions of people worldwide, and caused widespread social disruption.

Scientists believe that another pandemic is coming, sooner or later. It might be a major pandemic, like the one we had in 1918, or a milder pandemic, like the ones in 1957 or 1968. Either way, we need to be ready.

Is "bird flu" the same as "pandemic flu?"

No. There are many strains of flu that affect animals like birds and pigs, as well as strains that affect people. Over the last few years, one particular strain of bird flu has been spreading across Asia – and more recently, into Africa and Europe. The impact on poultry producers has been very significant, resulting in the loss of tens of millions of birds.

Health officials have been watching this flu strain very closely for another reason: People can sometimes get it from birds. So far that hasn't happened very often – relatively few people have gotten this kind of "bird flu." But for the people who do get it, this flu strain is very dangerous. About half of the people who've gotten it so far have died.

People don't get it very often because they usually don't get it from each other. In a few isolated cases, the virus has spread from person to person, usually within families. But in most cases, people have gotten it from *close contact* with domestic poultry or their droppings. This is still mostly a disease of birds – not a disease of people, and not a pandemic.

Will bird flu end up causing a pandemic?

Right now, we don't know. Unless the virus changes – so that people can get it easily from each other – it is very unlikely to cause a pandemic. Health officials are concerned that might happen, which is why they're keeping a close eye on the situation. Right now, this illness is still almost entirely a disease of birds – not people – and it may or may not end up causing a pandemic. The next pandemic – when it happens – may be caused by a completely different virus. But sooner or later, it's going to happen.

How will a pandemic affect us?

Some pandemics – like the ones in 1957 and 1968 – are relatively mild. But another pandemic like the one in 1918 could have a devastating effect on society. Roughly a third of the population may be sick, and another 10 percent could be reluctant to come to work. In Minnesota alone, as many as 172,000 people could need hospital-level care – in a state with only 8,000 staffed hospital beds – and more than 30,000 people could die.

But the impact of the disease is only part of the picture: The larger challenge may simply be to keep society running, and provide for basics like food, water, electricity and routine health care.

Are we ready for a pandemic?

You're never really "done" preparing for a pandemic. You can always do things to be better prepared.



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A lot of people have already been working very hard to get ready for a possible pandemic. That includes government agencies at the local, state and federal level. But it also includes the law enforcement and emergency response communities; the hospital and health care communities; the business sector; voluntary agencies and organizations; the faith community; the academic community and the schools.

A lot of work has already been done. We have been working on plans for tracking and preventing the spread of disease – before and during a possible pandemic. We have been developing plans for making the best use of whatever vaccines or antiviral drugs may be available. We have been working with health care providers to determine how we will care for very large numbers of sick people.

We have also been making arrangements for care of the tens of thousands of people who may die, here in Minnesota, if we have a major pandemic. We have been conducting exercises, all across the state, to test our readiness for a pandemic or some other type of public health emergency.

What do we need to do right now?

We need to continue our efforts to prepare for pandemic flu and other emergencies – and that includes things we can do as individuals and families.

We all need to have personal and family preparedness plans in place, so we know how to contact each other and stay in touch during an emergency. We need to start putting together a kit of emergency items for our families, with enough food, water and supplies to last up to two weeks.

Our work is not done, but we've made a good start. We're better prepared today than we were yesterday – and we'll be better prepared tomorrow than we are today.