

Pandemic Influenza: *What you can do to be ready*

There are things we can do – as individuals, and as a community – to be ready for a flu pandemic. But we need to start getting ready before an actual pandemic happens. That means knowing what to expect, and making plans to “ride out” a pandemic – as individuals, families and communities.

Know what to expect

Flu viruses change all the time – that’s why people have to get a flu shot every year. But usually, the change is gradual. Pandemics happen whenever there is a major change in the virus that causes flu. Because people have little or no immunity to the new virus, it can spread rapidly around the world, making many people ill.

There have been three pandemics in the past century – in 1918, 1957 and 1968. The 1957 and 1968 pandemics were relatively mild. Their impact was similar to regular, “seasonal” flu.

But the 1918 pandemic was a much different story. Millions of people became ill, all around the world – and at least half a million people died, in the U.S. alone. And the worst impact of the 1918 flu wasn’t limited to children, the elderly, or people with underlying health problems. Unlike regular flu, it also caused severe illness in young, healthy adults.

If we were to have another pandemic like the one in 1918, up to a third of the population would become ill. Here in Minnesota, an estimated 172,000 people would require hospital care, and over 30,000 people would die.

And the impact of a pandemic wouldn’t stop there. In addition to the 30 percent of the population who may become ill, another 10 percent are likely to stay home from work. They may fear exposure to the disease – or they may have concerns about exposing their families to pandemic flu.

Steps designed to slow the spread of the virus may also have an impact on day-to-day activities. There may be restrictions on travel and public gatherings. People may be asked to stay home from work or school for a period of time.

No matter how much we prepare for it, we won’t be

able to completely stop a pandemic in its tracks. A pandemic will have a major impact on our lives – and we need to be ready for that. But together, we can get through it.

Protect yourself and your family

Getting ready for a pandemic starts *now* – and there’s a lot you can do.

Stay healthy. Keep yourself in shape. Eat nutritious foods, don’t smoke, exercise regularly, and get enough sleep. And get a flu shot every fall, so you’re protected against ordinary “seasonal” flu.

Learn how to avoid spreading disease.

Practice “respiratory etiquette.” Start developing habits that will help you avoid getting – or spreading – infectious diseases. Cover your nose and mouth with a tissue – or the upper part of your sleeve – when you cough or sneeze. Dispose of the tissue afterward. Wash your hands thoroughly – and frequently. If you don’t have access to soap and water, use an alcohol-based, waterless hand cleaner.

Develop a family emergency plan. Know how you’ll get in touch with each other – and where you’ll gather as a family – in an emergency. Know where you’ll go, and what you’ll do. Keep a list of emergency phone numbers in a handy place. Know what routes you will use if you have to evacuate. Store emergency numbers in your cell phones under “ICE” (“In Case of Emergency”), so someone else can call your emergency numbers if you’re not able to. Use more than one entry (“ICE-1,” “ICE-2,” etc.) if you have more than one emergency number.

Create an emergency kit. Make sure your kit has everything you’ll need to get by if you have to remain at home for a period of time – up to two weeks, if possible. Be sure to include:

- A supply of drinking water (one gallon per person per day) and nonperishable food.
- Basic equipment like a flashlight, battery-operated radio, and a supply of batteries. Be sure to include a manual can opener.
- Personal care products – soap, toiletries, waterless hand cleaner, extra glasses or contact lenses, prescription and over-the-counter drugs, tissues and toilet paper, and any special items for infants or people with special health needs.
- A good first aid kit.
- Kitchen utensils and dishwashing supplies.



Commissioner’s Office
625 Robert St. North
P.O. Box 64975
St. Paul, MN 55164-0975
(651) 201-5000
www.health.state.mn.us

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- Extra clothing and bedding.
- Critical miscellaneous items – notebook & pen, whistle, money & credit cards, extra car keys, medical and insurance information, and copies of other important documents.
- Games, reading material, and other entertainment items – for children and adults. You might need to stay home for a while during a pandemic.

Get more information. To learn more about preparing for a pandemic, go to the Minnesota avian/pandemic website at www.birdflu.state.mn.us – or the federal pandemic website at www.pandemicflu.gov.

Prepare your community

Find out what your own community is doing to prepare for a pandemic – public health and emergency response agencies, business, schools, voluntary agencies and organizations. Find out where you fit in and how you can help. Schools and the business community have an especially important role.

For business:

- Develop and test a pandemic plan for your business. Include plans for maintaining operations during a pandemic.
- Determine how you will get reliable information during a pandemic, and share it with your employees.
- Prepare for the possible impact of a travel or transportation ban on your operations, and develop policies for travel to and from areas affected by the pandemic.
- Educate your employees about pandemic flu, and the measures necessary to slow the spread of a pandemic.
- Develop strategies to help employees eliminate unnecessary face-to-face contact with customers and other workers – like staggered work schedules, office layout, seating arrangements in meetings, or use of telecommuting.
- Encourage workers to stay home when they're sick and practice good respiratory hygiene (covering coughs and sneezes, hand washing, etc.)
- Anticipate possible increases – or decreases – in the demand for your products or services.

For schools:

- Learn how your school – or school system – will fit into the larger emergency response system for your community. Determine how the decision to close schools will be made, who will do it, and how it will be announced.
- Identify strategies for providing education services to students during a school closure – web, phone trees, mailed lessons and assignments, radio and television.
- Determine how you will communicate with staff, students and families during all phases of a pandemic.
- Emphasize the importance of respiratory hygiene for students and staff. Make sure that soap or waterless hand cleaner – and other supplies – are available to encourage hand washing and other positive behaviors.
- Establish clear sick leave policies that encourage sick people to stay home.
- Be prepared to deal with issues of language and culture in communicating with students and families about a pandemic.

For everybody:

- Get to know your neighbors – and find out what you can do to look out for each other during a pandemic or some other type of emergency. Pool your resources so you can be better prepared.
- Identify the support systems you will rely on during an emergency – churches and faith communities, social or fraternal organizations, voluntary groups and organizations, etc.
- Figure out how you'll keep up on the latest information during an emergency – TV, radio, phone contact, posting of information in public locations, etc. Allow for the fact that some communication systems may be down temporarily.
- For more information on how to prepare yourself and your community, go to

www.birdflu.state.mn.us

or

www.pandemicflu.gov.