



South Central Public Health District

Prevent. Promote. Protect.

## Pandemic Influenza & Avian (Bird) Flu

### What is pandemic influenza?

An influenza pandemic is a global outbreak of disease that occurs when a new influenza virus appears in human populations, causes serious illness, and then spreads easily from person to person worldwide.

Most people will not have any natural immunity to a new virus. A pandemic flu would likely spread rapidly through international travel.

### How is pandemic influenza different from a regular influenza season?

A flu pandemic has little or nothing in common with the annual flu season. A pandemic flu would be a new strain and a much more serious and contagious flu virus. Humans would have no natural resistance to a new strain of influenza. Also, there is a vaccine for *seasonal* flu, but there is no vaccine available at this time for a pandemic flu.

### Why is pandemic influenza so serious?

If a new, highly contagious strain of influenza begins to infect humans, it would likely cause widespread illness and death within a matter of months, and could last up to two years. The Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) predict that as much as 25% to 30% of the U.S. population could be sick, hospitalized, and many may die as a result of severe illness.

### Can pandemic flu be prevented?

Public Health is currently working on a plan to limit the spread of a 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.

Even so, it may not be possible to prevent or stop a pandemic once it begins to spread easily from person-to-person. A person infected with influenza can be contagious for 24 hours before symptoms may appear and for seven days thereafter, making it extremely easy for the virus to infect large numbers of people.

Although the federal government is stockpiling large quantities of medical supplies and antiviral drugs, no country in the world has enough anti-virals to protect their citizens. Anti-virals would be used to treat severe cases as long as there was a reasonable chance that the drugs might help save lives. Anti-virals might also be reserved for people who work in areas that place them at high risk for exposure in an outbreak, such as health care workers.

Other strategies for slowing the spread of a potentially deadly pandemic influenza virus 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; however, vaccine development efforts are under way to protect humans against the current H5N1 bird flu virus.

### When is pandemic influenza expected?

It is difficult to predict when the next influenza pandemic will occur or how severe it will be.

(over)

## Why does the current H5N1 bird flu outbreak pose a risk of causing a pandemic influenza in humans?

The danger is that the bird flu virus may mutate into a new form of human flu that would be easily spread person to person.

Some migratory waterfowl carry the H5N1 virus, with no apparent harm, but transmit the virus to susceptible domestic poultry. The highly lethal H5N1 outbreak among domestic poultry is widespread and uncontrolled – and has directly infected a small number of humans. People who have close contact with infected birds or surfaces that have been contaminated with droppings from infected birds are at risk of becoming infected themselves. A history of poultry consumption in an infected country is not a risk factor, provided the food was thoroughly cooked and the person was not involved in food preparation. Simply traveling to a country with ongoing outbreaks in poultry or sporadic human cases does not place a traveler at increased risk of infection, provided the person does not visit live poultry markets, farms or other environments where exposure to diseased birds may occur.

More than 200 million birds in affected countries have either died from the disease or were killed in order to try to control the outbreak. Many Asian countries are currently dealing with bird flu outbreaks – Cambodia, China, Indonesia, Japan, Laos, South Korea, Thailand, and Vietnam. Bird flu continues to spread geographically from its original focus in Asia. Further spread of the virus along migratory routes of wild water fowl is anticipated.

So far, there has been no sustained person-to-person spread of the disease. However, a few isolated cases of human-to-human spread between family members are currently under investigation.

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

The reported symptoms of bird flu in humans range 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. Diarrhea, vomiting, abdominal pain, chest pain, and bleeding from the nose and gums have also been reported as early symptoms in some cases. In many cases, health deteriorates rapidly leading to a high percentage of death in those infected.

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

There are several things you can do to reduce your risk of influenza:

- Make a personal preparedness plan and kit: visit <http://www.redcross.org>.
- Stop germs from spreading.
  - ❖ Cover your mouth and nose with tissue when coughing and sneezing
  - ❖ Wash your hands often
  - ❖ Avoid touching your eyes, nose, or mouth
  - ❖ Avoid close contact with sick people
  - ❖ Stay home when you are sick
- Stay informed. These web sites provide regularly updated information about bird flu and pandemic flu:
  - ❖ <http://www.pandemicflu.gov>
  - ❖ <http://www.cdc.gov/flu/avian/gen-info/pandemics.htm>
  - ❖ World Health Organization: <http://www.who.int/en/>
- If you plan to travel to Southeast Asia, check the CDC website for travel advisories at <http://www.cdc.gov/travel/>.

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