



DEPARTMENT OF HEALTH

Frequently Asked Questions About Pandemic Influenza (Flu)

1. What is pandemic influenza?

A pandemic is a worldwide outbreak of disease. An influenza or flu pandemic occurs when a new or changed flu virus appears in the human population, causes serious illness and death, and spreads easily from person-to-person worldwide.

2. In what ways is the seasonal flu different from a pandemic flu?

Seasonal flu occurs every year, usually during the fall and winter months. It is caused by flu viruses that are already circulating among people; therefore, some protection against the virus exists. People who are most at risk for illness usually include the very young, the very old and those with chronic health conditions.

Pandemic flu is difficult to predict and more severe than seasonal flu. A pandemic may begin with a new flu virus to which few people have been exposed; therefore, little protection against the virus exists. As a result, more people will get ill. Pandemic flu may last longer than seasonal flu and affect many more people in the population.

3. Is there a relationship between pandemic flu and avian (bird) flu?

The bird flu is an illness caused by avian (bird) influenza (flu) viruses. These viruses occur naturally among wild migrating birds such as geese. These birds carry the virus, but usually do not get sick. Sick wild birds can spread the virus to domestic birds, such as chickens, ducks, and turkeys, which do become very sick and often die. Most cases of the current avian influenza virus in humans have resulted from direct contact with infected poultry or contaminated surfaces.

The avian influenza virus does not yet spread easily from person-to-person. Because all flu viruses have the ability to change, scientists are concerned that this particular avian flu virus will change and spread easily from person-to-person, resulting in a pandemic.

4. How likely is it that pandemic flu will occur?

Pandemic flu has occurred three times in the last century: the Spanish Flu (1918-1919), the Asian Flu (1957-1958), and the Hong Kong Flu (1968-1969). Because of this history, it is very likely a pandemic flu will occur again. It is difficult to predict when the next pandemic will occur or how severe it will be. Since flu viruses are always changing, the possibility of a pandemic always exists.

5. Will the seasonal flu vaccine protect people against pandemic flu?

Seasonal flu vaccine is not likely to be effective against a pandemic flu virus because flu vaccines are designed to protect against a specific virus already in the human population. However, it is recommended that people get seasonal flu shots to remain as healthy as possible.

6. Will there be vaccines or medicines to protect against influenza pandemic?

A vaccine probably will not be available in the early stages of a pandemic. Once the pandemic flu virus is identified, it could take at least 6 months to develop, test and produce the vaccine specific to the new virus. If a pandemic occurs, it is expected the government will distribute the vaccine.

Today, the CDC recommends the use of zanamivir (Relenza) or oseltamivir (Tamiflu) for both the treatment and prevention of influenza viruses in adults and children.

7. How will a pandemic flu outbreak affect Anne Arundel County?

A pandemic flu outbreak will likely last 6 to 8 weeks, with 2-3 periods of illness expected to occur during the year. The U.S. Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) predicts that up to 30% of the population may become ill in a major pandemic flu. Illness among school-aged children is predicted at 40%, and approximately 20% of adults may be ill. Thus, at any given time, schools may be closed and a substantial portion of the community may be out of work due to illness or caring for ill family members.

(Continued on other side)

8. What is being done in Anne Arundel County to prepare for a potential pandemic flu outbreak?

The Anne Arundel County Department of Health is working with County and Annapolis City partners to strengthen our ability to respond quickly to a pandemic. Plans include how to contain the spread of disease, distribute vaccines and antiviral medications, and communicate up-to-date information to the public.

9. Is it safe to eat poultry?

You cannot get the flu from eating properly handled and cooked chicken, turkey or other fowl. Avian flu is caused by a virus that is destroyed by the heat of normal cooking (minimum of 160 °F). However, remember to wash hands with soap and warm water for 20 seconds before and after handling raw poultry.

10. What can families do to prepare for a potential pandemic flu outbreak?

- **Get a yearly seasonal flu shot.** Even though the flu vaccine may not protect against a new virus such as the avian flu, it will protect against seasonal flu.
- **Wash your hands regularly and use hand sanitizers.** These practices can reduce not only the flu, but also a variety of other bacterial and viral illnesses.
- **Cover coughs and sneezes with a tissue or the inside of your elbow.** This reduces virus particles in the environment. In addition, regularly cleaning frequently used surfaces, such as doorknobs and counters, can also reduce the virus in the environment.
- **Stay home if you are ill and avoid crowded gatherings.** This is extremely effective in reducing the spread of flu.
- **Prepare to shelter in place.** Acquire supplies that will allow you to stay home for at least 3 to 5 days in the event of an emergency or if you are too sick to go out. Keep a supply of non-perishable food (3-5 days or more supply per person) and sufficient water (1 gallon per person per day).

11. Where can I locate additional information on pandemic influenza?

The Anne Arundel County Department of Health maintains up-to-date information on www.aahealth.org, along with a list of resources to assist you. Should a pandemic occur, the Department of Health will inform the public.

For additional information call the Department's Office of Emergency Preparedness and Response at 410-222-4115.

Source: Information on this factsheet is a compilation of information found on www.pandemicflu.gov, the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, www.cdc.gov, and the Maryland Department of Health and Mental Hygiene, <http://flu.maryland.gov>.