

Pandemic Influenza Facts

For More Information:

Centers for Disease Control & Prevention, Toll-Free:

1-800-CDC-INFO (232-4636)

1-888-232-6348 TTY

E-mail: cdcinfo@cdc.gov

Clinician Info:
877-554-4625

You can also visit the following Web sites for the latest information on influenza:

Oregon Department of Human Services:

<http://www.oregon.gov/DHS/ph/spotlight/panflu/index.shtml>

Centers for Disease Control & Prevention:

www.cdc.gov/flu/pandemic/index.htm

World Health Organization:

www.who.int/csr/disease/influenza/pandemic10things/en/index.html

Introduction

- There are many different types or “strains” of influenza. Pandemic influenza is a global outbreak of disease that occurs when a new influenza virus emerges and starts spreading easily from person to person through coughing and sneezing.
- Because the virus is new, people will have no natural immunity (protection) and those who become ill may experience more serious disease than that caused by normal seasonal influenza viruses.
- Once a pandemic virus develops, it can spread rapidly, causing outbreaks around the world. A major pandemic could overwhelm public health and health care systems and create widespread social disruption.
- Flu pandemics are known to have occurred periodically in the past several hundred years. The 1918 “Spanish flu” was the 20th century’s largest pandemic and killed at least 500,000 people in the United States and up to 40 million worldwide. There were also much smaller pandemics in 1957 and 1968, in which the death rates were double or triple the number that occur in a usual year. (The “usual” influenza is, in fact, a deadly disease that should be taken seriously, causing an estimated 36,000 deaths in the US each year.)

Surveillance and Detection

- Detecting a pandemic relies on surveillance, a core public health function that informs us when cases of a new disease arrive, how many people are sick or at risk of infection, and where the disease is spreading.
- The U.S. Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) and the World Health Organization (WHO) have large surveillance programs to monitor and detect influenza activity around the world, including the emergence of possible pandemic strains of influenza virus.
- Lab testing is critical for identifying specific details of the pandemic disease. The Oregon State Public Health Laboratory is a key player in testing specimens and forwarding them to the CDC when necessary.

Prevention

- In a pandemic, the community systems we rely on—health care, schools, work, travel, church and social events—may be severely disrupted. Disease control will require individual and community action:
 - Personal hygiene measures—washing hands frequently, covering coughs, staying home when ill, and staying informed of the situation.
 - Community measures—voluntary isolation of ill people, limiting illness to specific wards or hospitals, curtailing travel, and canceling large events (basketball games, concerts, etc.)—may be used.

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Risks

- Many scientists believe it is only a matter of time until the next influenza pandemic occurs. The severity of the next pandemic cannot be predicted, but modeling studies suggest that the impact of a pandemic on the United States could be substantial. The CDC projects that as much as 25% to 35% of the US population could be affected.
- However, the risk to Americans from the current H5N1 avian influenza outbreak in Asia, Europe and Africa is considered low. The strain of the virus found in other countries has not been found in the United States. There have been no human cases of H5N1 avian influenza in the United States. However, it is possible that travelers to affected countries could become infected.
- The people in other countries who have become sick with avian influenza have been those with close contact with infected poultry. Spread of the virus from person to person has been rare.

Controlling the Spread of Disease

- Although a vaccine is not likely to be available to protect against a new pandemic strain of influenza, getting a flu shot is still the best way to prevent normal seasonal influenza that kills thousands of people in the U.S. each year.
- Wash your hands frequently. Use waterless alcohol-based hand gels when soap and water are not available and when hands are not visibly soiled.
- If you are not feeling well, wash your hands frequently and cover your mouth with a tissue when you cough or sneeze. Avoid touching or kissing friends and family members, avoid public gatherings, and stay a safe distance (more than three feet) away from other people to avoid spreading your illness.
- When planning an international trip, check the CDC Web site or call their public information hotline at 1-888-246-2675 for the latest travel advice.
- The CDC currently advises travelers to countries with known outbreaks of avian influenza to avoid poultry farms and bird markets where live poultry are raised or kept. Avoid any surfaces that appear to be contaminated with poultry feces or secretions.
- Influenza virus is destroyed by heat. Thoroughly cook all foods, including poultry, eggs and poultry blood.
- After return from travel, monitor your health for 10 days. If you become ill with fever and develop a cough or difficulty breathing during this 10-day period, be sure to tell your healthcare provider about your travel.

Treatment

- Antiviral drugs and supportive care would likely be the treatment for a new strain of influenza in humans. However, antiviral drug supplies will likely be inadequate in the early stages of a pandemic.
- Unfortunately, once a potential pandemic strain of influenza virus is identified, it will take 6 to 12 months produce new vaccine, so there will be little available at the start of a pandemic, and at any time during a pandemic the need for vaccine will likely exceed the supply.