



Healthy People Living in  
Healthy Communities

# El Dorado County Public Health Department

## Pandemic Influenza Fact Sheet

Pandemic and avian influenza have been the focus of widespread media coverage. This fact sheet is being provided to keep you informed.

**Information Updated: February 6, 2008**

### What is pandemic influenza?

An influenza pandemic is a worldwide outbreak of disease that occurs when there is a new flu virus that can spread quickly from person to person.

### Is there an influenza pandemic right now?

There is no human influenza pandemic in the world right now.

### Why are people worried about avian "bird flu" right now?

A bird influenza virus first identified in 1997 has now spread across Asia, Africa and Europe. This "bird flu" is called Avian H5N1 influenza (or Avian Influenza). This virus is spread easily among birds and has killed many birds, esp. domestic poultry. It has also caused serious illness and death in some people who have had very close contact with sick wild birds or domestic poultry.

### Are avian influenza and pandemic influenza the same?

No. There is a difference between avian influenza and pandemic influenza. Avian influenza is primarily a disease of birds. Although it is easily spread among birds, it is not easily spread from birds to humans. For a human pandemic to occur with this virus, it would need to undergo a genetic change so that it can be easily spread from human to human.

### How would pandemic flu affect communities and businesses?

If an influenza pandemic occurred, many people could become sick at the same time and would be unable to go to work. Many would stay home to care for sick family members. Schools and businesses might close to try to prevent disease spread. Large group gatherings might be cancelled. Public transportation might be reduced. Families, communities, schools and businesses must prepare for pandemic influenza.

### What is the Government doing to prepare?

Governments around the world are preparing for the possibility of an influenza pandemic under the leadership of the World Health Organization (WHO) and the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC). In California,

leadership for pandemic influenza planning is occurring through the California Department of Health Services.

### What is El Dorado County doing to prepare?

Flu surveillance activities are already occurring at local hospital and healthcare facilities in El Dorado County. The El Dorado County Public Health Department is also collaborating with agency partners and has established a local flu task force to develop a pandemic flu emergency response plan. Agency partners include: El Dorado County Office of Emergency Services, Environmental Management, Public Health Department, Department of Human Services, Agriculture Department, Mental Health Department, Marshall Medical Center, Barton Memorial Hospital, County Office of Education, California Department of Fish and Game, and others. We are educating our businesses and the community about pandemic influenza and its possible effects, and most importantly, about what we can do to protect our families, our community and ourselves.

### How serious is pandemic flu?

Health officials are concerned that the continued spread of the Avian H5N1 virus across Asia, Europe, Africa and other geographic areas could represent a threat to human health. If the flu virus changes so that it is easily transmitted from human to human, it could cause a pandemic. Most people would not have immunity to the new flu virus, and many could become sick.

### How is pandemic flu different from seasonal flu?

Pandemic influenza is a severe form of influenza caused by a new flu virus, which causes global outbreak. Because there is little natural immunity, almost everyone will be susceptible to infection. There were 3 human flu pandemics in the 20<sup>th</sup> Century, with the most serious occurring in 1918, which killed over 50 million people worldwide.

Seasonal influenza (often called "the flu") consists of influenza illness, which occurs every year at a specific time, i.e., Nov-Mar in the U.S. If the predominant flu virus for one year is similar to that of the previous year, people who were vaccinated or had the flu the previous year may have partial immunity to the new virus. The CDC tries to project which flu subtypes are most likely to occur during a given year and coordinates development of flu vaccines early in the year to help prevent flu infection. This is why we have a different flu vaccine each year.

### How is influenza virus spread?

Influenza virus is spread when a sick person coughs or sneezes into the face of another person. It can also spread by touching contaminated surfaces and then touching the face.

### What can I do to protect against pandemic or regular influenza?

The most important things you can do to prevent or slow the spread of influenza is to wash your hands frequently, cover your cough and stay away from sick people. Make sure you have soap and water or alcohol gel for hand washing in your home, workplace, school and the places that you play. Stay home when you are sick. You should get a seasonal flu shot, as it may provide partial protection against a pandemic flu strain and full protection against seasonal strains.

### Is there a vaccine?

The public should be aware that a vaccine for a pandemic virus would not be available for several months after a pandemic begins. There are hundreds of different flu strains, and it is impossible to know which strain of the flu will be responsible for a pandemic, therefore a vaccine cannot be made in advance. It may take up to six months to develop and distribute a new influenza vaccine.

### Will a mask protect me from pandemic influenza?

A mask such as a surgical mask, if worn over the nose and mouth, should protect most people from inhaling droplets containing flu virus. Eye coverings such as glasses, will provide additional protection from exposure to the virus. During a pandemic, people who are sick should use masks to help protect caretakers from the illness. People who are sick should also use masks if they absolutely must leave their house, to help protect others. Hospital and health care workers have a lot of exposure to people who are very sick. They use a special type of mask called an N-95 respirator. N-95 respirators only protect against influenza if they are carefully fitted and properly used.

### Is it safe to be around chickens or other birds?

Although the avian flu virus has not yet reached the United States, it is always good to be cautious, & use good hygiene, when handling birds.

- Do not touch sick or dead birds (including wild and domestic birds) with your bare hands.
- If you find a sick or dead chicken or other domestic bird, call California Department of Food and Agriculture at 800-491-1899.
- If you find a dead wild bird, call 877-WNV-BIRD. If you see a cluster of 5 or more dead wild birds, particularly water birds, such as ducks or geese, contact the California Department of Fish and Game at (916) 358-2790.
- Avoid touching bird droppings. If you do touch droppings, wash your hands right away with soap and warm water.

### Can I get bird flu from eating store-bought chicken or eggs?

No. Chicken and turkey sold in the U.S. are regularly inspected and come from farms free of Asian H5N1 bird flu. Also, no birds, poultry or eggs are allowed into the U.S. from infected parts of the world without severe import restrictions. Properly cooking poultry and eggs will kill any virus that might be present. NOTE: If you are

traveling to countries, which have H5N1 present in the domestic bird population, it is highly recommended that all poultry products be thoroughly cooked prior to consumption.

### What can I do to be prepared?

Preparing for a pandemic flu can greatly reduce your chances of getting sick and help limit the spread of disease.

- **Stay informed** about pandemic influenza and be prepared to respond. Consult [www.pandemicflu.gov](http://www.pandemicflu.gov) or the El Dorado County Public Health Department Website at [www.co.el-dorado.ca.us/publichealth](http://www.co.el-dorado.ca.us/publichealth) frequently for updates on pandemic influenza.
- **Stay home when you are sick.**
- **Wash your hands** as often as possible with warm water and soap; alcohol based sanitizers can also be effective.
- **Cover your cough and sneeze.** Use a tissue whenever possible, if a tissue is unavailable cough or sneeze into your upper sleeve.
- **Develop preparedness plans** as you would for other public health emergencies.
- **Stock up on supplies at home.** A two-week supply of food, water, prescription medicines, hygiene supplies, battery powered radio and lighting is recommended at a minimum.

### What can businesses do to be prepared?

Businesses could be greatly impacted by an influenza pandemic. Many employees may stay home because they are sick or are caring for sick family members. Some health experts predict that up to 40% of the American workforce may be absent during a pandemic. Businesses need to look at how they would handle significant employee shortages in the event of a pandemic, telecommuting policies, any considerations needed for providing personal protection for workers, etc.

## How to Wash Your Hands

- 1** Wet your hands under warm running water and apply some soap.
- 2** Lather up! Rub your hands together hard to build up lather. The friction will help scrub dirt and germs away.
- 3** Don't forget. Washing your palms isn't enough — make sure you wash hands front and back, get between your fingers, around your wrists, and under your nails for 20 seconds. Sing your favorite tune for 20 seconds to get the timing right.
- 4** Rinse well in warm water. A good rinse will get any last stragglers off your hands and down the drain!
- 5** Dry your hands completely. Wipe your hands with a paper towel and throw it away after

you're done.