

Influenza Pandemics

An influenza pandemic or pandemic flu occurs when a type of influenza (flu) virus changes — or mutates — into a form that easily spreads from person to person. Unlike the more common seasonal flu, a flu pandemic would cause many more deaths.

Pandemic flu has occurred three times in the past century: The “Spanish Flu” of 1918, the “Asian Flu” of 1957 and the “Hong Kong Flu” of 1968. Each of these pandemics lasted a year before public health was restored to normal.

Pandemics occur naturally and remain unpredictable. No one can anticipate when there will be other influenza pandemics. Here are the facts about pandemic influenza.

How The Flu Spreads

All types of Influenza spread when droplets containing the flu virus are passed from person to person. That’s why washing your hands often, covering your cough and sneezing into a sleeve or a tissue will help prevent the spread of infection. The flu virus can also be spread by contact with surfaces, such as doorknobs and countertops that have been contaminated by the virus.

Stopping The Spread

Practicing good hygiene habits such as frequent hand washing, covering your cough and staying at home when sick will help prevent the spread of the influenza virus. Social gatherings may be cancelled during a pandemic to prevent the spread of disease in the community.

Prepare.

Practice.

Participate.

Vaccinating people is another important method used to control an influenza pandemic but it will take time to create the right vaccine to protect people. Before an effective vaccine is available, isolation and quarantine are common practices to help minimize the impacts of pandemic influenza. Isolation is for infected people who will be hospitalized or told by health authorities to remain at home; quarantines are for those who may have been exposed to the virus but show no signs of illness.

Vaccine

Since a pandemic flu cannot be predicted in advance no reliable way exists to develop a vaccine that will effectively protect people from the strain. Once the flu virus is identified, scientists will create a vaccine as rapidly as possible. The process, however, can take months.

Treatments During An Influenza Pandemic

Hospitals, clinics and pharmacies may be overwhelmed during an influenza pandemic. People may need to care for the sick in their homes. Antiviral drugs like Tamiflu may help ease influenza’s symptoms. Bed rest, liquids, proper nutrition and over-the-counter medicines will also help ease discomfort.

The Public Health Role In An Influenza Pandemic

Public health departments such as Saint Paul – Ramsey County Public Health are working on plans to address a pandemic caused by infectious diseases. Efforts are currently underway to make us better prepared for a possible influenza pandemic by providing for people’s health care needs and maximize the availability of vaccines and antiviral drugs.

Influenza Pandemic Preparation

Washing your hands regularly is one of the best ways to protect yourself against any kind of infectious disease. It will become even more important during a pandemic, so it’s a good idea to develop the habit now. And cough into a tissue or your sleeve instead of into your hands, while keeping your hands away from your nose, mouth and eyes.

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In addition, make a plan of your own in case you or your family has to stay at home because of the flu. Prepare an emergency information list with phone numbers for your physician, pharmacist, current prescriptions, allergies and medical conditions. Have such "stay-at-home" supplies available as water, soups, pain and fever reducing medicines, tissues, thermometer, tea or juice. A good guide on what to stock is available in our "Stay-At-Home" insert.

Influenza Pandemics And Your Community

An influenza pandemic could cause severe illnesses and deaths interrupting normal daily activities at work, home and school. Additionally, there will be intense pressure on medical professionals, scientists, health care providers, public health, and government agencies to work quickly to control the spread



of the infectious disease and provide effective treatment to minimize the effects of the pandemic. Hospitals could be overloaded with patients, signaling the need to draw on public health staff and volunteers from the Medical Reserve Corps for support.

Finding Pandemic Information In Your Community

The media will play an important role in helping medical and public health professionals provide the public with the latest information about prevention, treatment and more. Additionally, a public health hotline and a web site will provide constant updates. By learning the basics about pandemic flu and practicing infectious disease prevention techniques now, you will be better prepared in event of an influenza pandemic.