

# **Pandemic Influenza Q & A**

## **Marin County Department of Health & Human Services**

### **1. What is an influenza pandemic?**

An influenza pandemic is an outbreak of disease that occurs when there is a new flu virus that can spread from person-to-person. Because a pandemic virus is new, no one has immunity to it, so it spreads quickly around the world. There have been three influenza pandemics in this century - in 1918-19, 1957-58, and 1968-69.

### **2. Is there an influenza pandemic right now?**

**NO. There is no influenza pandemic in the world right now.**

### **3. Why are people so worried about avian “bird” flu right now?**

A relatively new bird influenza virus has spread across Asia, Europe, and parts of Africa, and the Middle East. This “bird flu” is called Avian H5N1. It is very strong, and has caused millions of wild bird and poultry deaths. It has also caused serious illness and death in some people who have had very close contact with sick birds or poultry. But so far, the virus is not easily passed from sick birds or poultry to people, or from person to person.

No one knows for sure that the H5N1 virus will cause a pandemic. But experts are worried because this new bird flu virus is widespread. There is a lot of contact between people and poultry and animals in Asia and Africa. Together, this means there is a bigger chance that the bird flu could change into a virus that can be spread from person to person. IF this were to happen, there could be a pandemic.

### **4. Are avian (bird) flu and pandemic influenza the same?**

There is a big difference between avian influenza and pandemic influenza. Avian influenza infects mainly birds and poultry. It can also infect people or animals who have very close contact with sick birds or poultry. But bird flu is not easily spread from person to person, so it cannot cause a pandemic. A pandemic influenza could only happen if the virus changes so that it is passed easily from one person to another person. This kind of change has not happened with the avian H5N1 flu virus. We expect that avian H5N1 flu will show up in birds (mainly water fowl and shore birds) in California later this year or next year. But that will still not mean that there is a pandemic.

## **5. Isn't there a flu epidemic every year? What is different about a pandemic flu?**

Seasonal flu happens every winter. It is caused by a virus that is not very different from other flu viruses that people have been exposed to, so there is some immunity (the body's protection system) to it in the community. A pandemic flu virus is so different from other flu viruses that there is no immunity to it. A pandemic virus will affect a lot more people, and could make even healthy people very sick. About 36,000 people die in the United States each year from seasonal flu. Experts think that many millions of people could die worldwide in a pandemic.

## **6. Will there be a pandemic soon?**

No one can predict when the next pandemic will happen. Just like no one can predict the next earthquake. Because we live near big earthquake faults, we know we will have a big earthquake some day. But we don't know when "the big one" will happen, or just how big it will be. We also know that another pandemic will happen; but we can't tell when, or how severe it will be.

- **If there is an influenza pandemic, what will happen?**
  - No one knows for sure what will happen if there is another pandemic influenza. In the 1918-19 pandemic, tens of millions of people died around the world. Schools were closed, businesses shut down, people stayed at home, doctors and hospitals were overwhelmed. But in the milder pandemics of 1957-58 and 1968-69, many Americans were not even aware that there was a pandemic, even though thousands of people died. There is no way to predict how severe the next pandemic will be. But, to be on the safe side, government agencies are preparing for the worst case.

## **7. How is influenza virus spread?**

Influenza virus is mainly 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 your face.

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

Wash your hands frequently. Wash hands before you prepare food, eat, or touch your face. Cover coughs and sneezes with tissues. Cough or sneeze into your sleeve. Put used tissues in the trash and then wash your hands.

Make sure you have soap and water or alcohol gel for hand washing in your home, your workplace, your school, and the places that you play

Stay home when you are sick. Stay away from other people as much as possible when you are sick. Don't send sick children to school.

Avoid close contact with people who are sick.

Get a seasonal flu shot. Have a plan for you and your family (see below)

### **9. How would pandemic flu affect communities and businesses?**

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

### **10. How can I help my family be prepared?**

Keep a supply of two weeks worth of food, water, medicines, and supplies:

Two weeks of food that does not need a refrigerator.

Two weeks of water in sealed containers that cannot break. Plan on 14 gallons of water for each person.

A two-week supply of ibuprofen or acetaminophen for each person, for fever and pain.

Special liquids for someone who is dehydrated – for example Pedialyte for children or Gatorade for adults and teens.

Cell phone and charger

Supply of facemasks and plastic gloves if you are taking care of family members who are sick with the disease.

Disinfectants and chlorine bleach.

### **11. Couldn't we just get a flu vaccine if there is a pandemic influenza?**

Influenza viruses change very quickly. Each year, manufacturers make a new vaccine, to protect against the specific kind of virus that is spreading around the world. It usually takes about 6-9 months to make a new vaccine. That means that there will probably not be any vaccine for a new pandemic influenza virus for at least the first 6 months after a pandemic started.

### **12. Are there medicines that treat flu?**

There are several different kinds of medicines that can fight influenza, called “antivirals”. One example is Tamiflu. Antiviral medicines have two uses. They can be used to treat people who have influenza, to make the illness less severe and last fewer days. The medicines can also be used to prevent someone from getting influenza even if they have been exposed. This is called “prophylaxis”.

### **13. Will there be enough antiviral medicine and vaccine for everyone if there is a pandemic?**

In a pandemic, there will not be enough antiviral medicine or vaccine to prevent everyone from getting the flu. There may not be enough medicine to treat everyone who gets sick with influenza. There will also not be enough flu vaccine, even after an effective vaccine is developed.

- **Should families stockpile Tamiflu?**
- NO, do not stockpile Tamiflu or other antiviral medicines. If many people get Tamiflu when it is not needed, there is a bigger chance that the virus will become resistant to the medicine and it will not work at all. We are not sure that Tamiflu will work against the particular type of virus that causes a pandemic. You should only take Tamiflu when a health care provider tells you it is the right medicine.
- Federal, state, and local governments are developing plans to distribute vaccines and antivirals in case of pandemic influenza. These plans are designed to make sure that basic services (such as water, sanitation, health care, fire, police) are maintained even if a very large number of people are absent from work, and to make sure that the fewest number of people die from pandemic flu.

### **14. Will a mask protect me from pandemic influenza?**

There is not enough information right now to make good scientific recommendations about the use of masks to protect someone from getting influenza. In 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 and should also use masks.

### **15. What else can be done to protect people in a pandemic?**

Government could ask you to try “social distancing” to slow the spread of the pandemic influenza. You could be asked to stay home from work or school, and to stay away from crowded places or groups. “Stay at home” days are meant to limit contact between people.

### **16. Will the government quarantine people in a pandemic?**

Quarantine and isolation are public health actions that are used to stop or slow the spread of a contagious disease. Quarantine and isolation both keep people away from others, in homes, hospitals, or other health care facilities.

Quarantine is for people who have been exposed to a contagious disease, but are not sick. Sometimes people can be contagious (able to give someone else an illness) even before they feel sick. Quarantine separates the exposed person from other people for the amount of time that it would take to get sick after an exposure. Isolation is for people who are already sick and could spread the disease.

Quarantine and isolation are usually voluntary. Most people want to protect others from getting sick. It will be very important for people to cooperate with public health doctors and nurses if quarantine and isolation are needed. There are also laws that can require quarantine and isolation.

### **17. Is it safe to eat chicken and poultry?**

You can safely eat poultry (chicken, turkey, pheasants, ducks, etc) and poultry products if they are fully cooked. Do not eat pink or red meat. Cook eggs until the yolks are firm, not runny.

**18. Is it safe to be around chickens or birds?**

Do not touch sick or dead birds and poultry or bird droppings. If you do touch poultry or birds or their droppings, wash your hands right away with soap and water.

If you find a dead bird, call the California Department of Health Services at 1-877-WNV-BIRD (968-2473). If you find 5 or more dead birds, please call California Fish and Game 707-944-5500 or 916-358-2790. If you have chickens or poultry in your back yard and you think they are sick, call the California Department of Food and Agriculture at 1-800-491-1899.

**19. What is the Marin County Health Department doing to prepare for a pandemic influenza?**

Marin County HHS is working on a Pandemic Influenza Preparedness and Response Plan., and provides education and the latest information to health care providers, government officials, and others throughout the county. Marin County also has a small supply of antivirals to treat ill first responders. The health department communicates regularly with state and county agencies and posts updates on their website at [www.co.marin.ca.us](http://www.co.marin.ca.us)

**20. Where can I get more information about pandemic influenza and avian influenza?**

Marin County Avian flu webpage:

<http://www.co.marin.ca.us/depts/hh/main/hs/PublicHealth/Flu/AvianFlu.cfm>

U.S. Department of Health and Human Services <http://www.pandemicflu.gov/>

California Department of Health Services

<http://www.dhs.ca.gov/ps/dcdc/izgroup/pdf/Draft%20Pandemic%20Influenza%20Plan%201-18-06.pdf>

World Health Organization

[http://www.wpro.who.int/health\\_topics/pandemic\\_preparedness/](http://www.wpro.who.int/health_topics/pandemic_preparedness/)

[http://www.wpro.who.int/health\\_topics/avian\\_influenza/](http://www.wpro.who.int/health_topics/avian_influenza/)

NOTE: This Q&A has been modified from one created by the City of Berkeley Health and Human Services Department. We would like to thank them for allowing us to use their information.