



Highlights of [GAO-06-221T](#), a statement for the record for the Committee on Government Reform, House of Representatives

## Why GAO Did This Study

Concern has been rising about the nation's preparedness to respond to vaccine shortages that could occur in future annual influenza seasons or during an influenza pandemic—a global influenza outbreak. Although the timing or extent of a future influenza pandemic cannot be predicted, studies suggest that its effect in the United States could be severe, and shortages of vaccine could occur. For the 2004–05 annual influenza season, the nation lost about half its expected influenza vaccine supply when one of two major manufacturers announced in October 2004 that it would not release any vaccine. GAO examined federal, state, and local actions taken in response to the shortage, including lessons learned. The nation's experience during the unexpected 2004–05 vaccine shortfall offers insights into some of the challenges that government entities will face in a pandemic.

GAO was asked to provide a statement on lessons learned from the 2004–05 vaccine shortage and their relevance to planning and preparing for similar situations in the future, including an influenza pandemic. This statement is based on a GAO report, *Influenza Vaccine: Shortages in 2004–05 Season Underscore Need for Better Preparation* (GAO-05-984), and on previous GAO reports and testimonies about influenza vaccine supply and pandemic preparedness.

[www.gao.gov/cgi-bin/getrpt?GAO-06-221T](http://www.gao.gov/cgi-bin/getrpt?GAO-06-221T).

To view the full product, including the scope and methodology, click on the link above. For more information, contact Marcia Crosse at (202) 512-7119 or [crossem@gao.gov](mailto:crossem@gao.gov).

# INFLUENZA PANDEMIC

## Applying Lessons Learned from the 2004–05 Influenza Vaccine Shortage

### What GAO Found

A number of lessons emerged from federal, state, and local responses to the 2004–05 influenza vaccine shortage that carry implications for handling future vaccine shortages in either an annual influenza season or an influenza pandemic.

- First, limited contingency planning slows response. At the start of the 2004–05 influenza season, when the supply shortfall became apparent, the nation lacked a contingency plan specifically to address severe shortages. The absence of such a plan led to delays and uncertainties on the part of state and local public health entities on how best to ensure access to vaccine by individuals at high risk of severe influenza-related complications.
- Second, streamlined mechanisms to expedite vaccine availability are key to an effective response. During the 2004–05 shortage, for example, federal purchases of vaccine licensed for use in other countries but not the United States were not completed in time to meet peak demand. Some states' experience also highlighted the importance of mechanisms to transfer available vaccine quickly and easily from one state to another.
- Third, effective response requires clear and consistent communication. Consistency among federal, state, and local communications is critical for averting confusion. State and local health officials also emphasized the value of updated information when responding to changing circumstances, using diverse media to reach diverse audiences, and educating providers and the public about prevention alternatives.

Over the past 5 years, GAO has urged the Department of Health and Human Services (HHS) to complete its plan to prepare for and respond to an influenza pandemic. GAO has reported on the importance of planning to address critical issues such as how vaccine will be purchased and distributed; how population groups will be given priority for vaccination; and how federal resources should be deployed before the nation faces a pandemic. On November 2, 2005, HHS released its pandemic influenza plan. GAO did not have the opportunity to review the plan before issuing this statement to determine the extent to which the plan addresses these critical issues.