

## IV. Fact Sheet: Pandemic Flu Basics

*The threat of a flu pandemic is real. The Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) and other leading public health experts agree that it is not a question of IF a pandemic will occur, but WHEN it will occur. Preparing now will make a difference to you and your family during a pandemic.*

### **What is a flu pandemic?**

A flu (influenza) pandemic is an outbreak of a new flu virus that spreads around the world. The virus will spread easily from person to person, mostly through coughing and sneezing. Because the virus is new to people, everyone will be at risk of getting it.

### **What are the effects of a flu pandemic?**

A flu pandemic will have a significant impact on society. A pandemic could result in a large number of people falling ill, including children and young adults, with many deaths. A pandemic could also require restrictions on travel, alterations to normal business operations, and dismissal of students from school to help slow the spread of infection.

The United States was overwhelmed by the 1918–1919 flu pandemic, which caused the deaths of at least 675,000 Americans. If a pandemic of similar severity occurred today, 90 million Americans could become ill, and approximately 2 million Americans could die.

In addition to the impact on human health, a flu pandemic presents a major threat to the world economy.

### **Why should we be concerned now?**

CDC and other leading public health experts agree that the threat of a flu pandemic is real—it's not a question of IF one will happen, but WHEN it will happen. They are concerned now that the H5N1 virus (bird flu) is changing and could evolve into a pandemic flu virus.

### **Why should we prepare now?**

It is impossible to predict when the next flu pandemic will occur or how severe it will be. Regardless of where a pandemic starts, everyone around the world will be at risk. If you do not take steps to prepare *before* a pandemic, it will be harder for you to follow important health advice *when* a pandemic occurs.

### **What are the symptoms of a pandemic flu infection?**

The symptoms of a pandemic flu infection will likely be similar to those of seasonal flu, but they may last longer and be more severe.

### **Will there be a vaccine available for pandemic flu?**

A vaccine for pandemic flu may not be available for 4-6 months after a pandemic starts, and even then, it may only be available in limited amounts.

### **Will we need to wear facemasks and respirators during a flu pandemic?**

If used correctly, facemasks and respirators may help prevent some exposure to flu viruses. However, facemasks should be used along with other preventive measures, such as frequent hand washing.

### **How does pandemic flu differ from seasonal flu?**

There are important differences between pandemic flu and seasonal flu.

- People will have little or no immunity to pandemic flu since it is a new virus to humans. With seasonal flu, people have some immunity built up from previous exposure to the viruses.
- Symptoms of pandemic flu may be more severe than seasonal flu.
- More people are likely to die from pandemic flu than from seasonal flu.
- Pandemic flu could happen at any time of the year. Seasonal flu usually occurs in the fall and winter in the United States.
- Vaccines for pandemic flu may not be available for 4-6 months after a pandemic starts. Vaccines for seasonal flu are available each year and are based on known flu strains.

### **How is the United States preparing for the next flu pandemic?**

- The United States is working with other nations and the World Health Organization (WHO) to strengthen systems to detect and contain outbreaks of viruses that may cause a pandemic.
- The United States is improving vaccine technology in order to produce vaccines quickly and in large quantities.
- Preparedness information and checklists have been developed for different sectors of the economy and for individuals, families and communities, to help reduce the effects of a pandemic.
- The Government is providing funding, advice, and other support to States to assist with pandemic preparation.
- The Government is providing up-to-date information through [www.pandemicflu.gov](http://www.pandemicflu.gov), the official Government Web site on this topic.
- The United States is stockpiling antiviral medicines, such as Tamiflu, to treat persons sick with pandemic flu.

### **How should individuals prepare?**

The U.S. Department of Health and Human Services (HHS), CDC, and health experts ask individuals to stock up on foods and other necessities, improve health, and plan ahead for how they will care for themselves and family members during a flu pandemic.

#### Stock Up:

- Store nonperishable foods, bottled water, over-the-counter drugs, health supplies, and other necessities.
- HHS recommends having a 2-week supply, but stocking up can take place over time.
- These supplies can be useful in other types of emergencies, such as power outages.

#### Improve Health:

- Wash your hands with soap and water frequently throughout the day.
- Cover your nose and mouth with your sleeve or a tissue when you cough or sneeze.

#### Plan Ahead:

- Plan for what you will do in the following cases:
  - if schools are dismissed
  - if you cannot go to work, or
  - if you or a family member becomes sick and needs care.

### **How do I learn more?**

For more information, visit [www.pandemicflu.gov](http://www.pandemicflu.gov)