PANDEMIC FLU

What is pandemic flu (influenza)?
When a flu quickly spreads around the world it is known as a pandemic flu. Pandemic flu occurs when a new, highly infectious and dangerous strain of the virus appears. Unlike the common flu outbreaks every winter, flu pandemics can be expected to occur every few decades.

We know from study of previous pandemics that a pandemic tends to unfold in waves, that is periods of exponentially increasing disease separated by periods of declining disease activity. Subsequent waves tend to be more severe than the previous waves of a pandemic.

How is a pandemic different from the annual flu season?
There are small changes in the flu virus that occur continually over time (drift). However, the virus can change dramatically and unexpectedly through a process known as "shift." Shift results in the appearance of a new influenza virus to which few (if any) people would have immunity. If this new virus spreads easily from person-to-person, it could quickly travel around the world and cause increased levels of serious illness and death, affecting millions of people. This is called an influenza pandemic. Fortunately, pandemics don't occur very often. There has not been an influenza pandemic since 1968.

What are the symptoms of pandemic flu?
Flu symptoms usually include high fever, headache, fatigue, dry cough, sore throat, runny or stuffy nose, and muscle aches. Gastro-intestinal symptoms, such as nausea, vomiting and diarrhea are much more common among children than adults.

Some of the complications caused by flu include bacterial pneumonia, dehydration, and worsening of chronic medical conditions such as congestive heart failure, asthma, or diabetes. Children may get sinus problems and ear infections.

Certain groups of people are at an increased risk for serious complications from the flu. This group includes people age 65 years and older, those with chronic medical conditions, pregnant women and children between six months and 23 months of age.

How is pandemic flu spread?
Influenza viruses are commonly spread from person to person through respiratory droplets through coughs and sneezes. Viruses can also be spread when a person touches respiratory droplets on an object or surface and then touches their own mouth or nose, or eyes before washing their hands.

Scientific studies show that people can be contagious from one day before developing symptoms and up to seven days after getting sick, sometimes longer. In general, however, people are most contagious earlier in the illness than later.

Is there a vaccine for the pandemic flu?
The threat of an unknown virus is the most challenging problem. Officials cannot develop a vaccine if they do not know which virus is circulating. Once a pandemic flu virus is identified, a vaccine specific to that virus can be developed. Because of the current methods used to produce a flu vaccine, it can take at least 6 months to develop a new vaccine and then a longer period to distribute it.

Will vaccination, if available, be helpful during a pandemic?
The best method of preventing the spread of the flu is the timely development, distribution, and administration of influenza vaccine. Even with delayed availability, vaccination has the potential to have a significant impact on subsequent waves (spreading) of a pandemic.

Does the public still need to be vaccinated after the first wave of pandemic cases seems to be over?
Yes, because there is the potential of a "second wave" of infections that can develop during a pandemic. The disease infects one group of people first, infections appear to decrease and then infections increase in a different part of the population.

How can I best protect myself during a pandemic?

- Avoid close contact with people who are sick. When you are sick, keep your distance from others to protect them from getting sick too.
- Stay home from work, school, and errands when you are sick. You will help prevent others in your community from catching your illness.
- Cover your mouth and nose with a tissue when coughing or sneezing and dispose of the tissue and wash your hands immediately so you don't spread your germs to others.
- Washing your hands after handling potentially contaminated materials and before eating or touching your face will help protect you from germs.
- Avoid touching your eyes, nose, or mouth. Germs are often spread when a person touches something that is contaminated with germs and then touches his or her eyes, nose, or mouth.

What is the Department of Health doing to prevent a pandemic flu outbreak in Hawaii?

- Ensuring continued annual flu surveillance in Hawaii via the Sentinel Physician Network (which is also part of the national network coordinated through the CDC). DOH also continues to encourage more physicians to participate to expand the surveillance network.

- Enhanced Influenza Surveillance and Response at Honolulu International Airport. Worked with the CDC Quarantine Station and airport health providers, Queen's Airport Medical Services, to establish a voluntary program for early identification and diagnostic testing of passengers with fever and illness. If history is consistent with possible exposure to avian flu, testing will also be performed to try to specifically identify H5N1.

- Completion of Hawaii's Pandemic Flu Preparedness Plan which outlines the Department of Health (DOH) response (coordination of operations with partners, enhanced surveillance, vaccine delivery if available, antiviral delivery as available, quarantine and isolation if necessary and/or useful, healthcare delivery, and communications).

- Coordinating Strategic National Stockpile plans for potential distribution of antivirals, and considering alternative options to obtain antivirals for Hawaii's people.

- Developing plans for DOH surge capacity.

- Distributing educational materials to physicians and other health-care providers.

- Maintaining communications with state agencies, healthcare providers, first responders, and various other partners.

- Providing useful information to the public and building public awareness.

- Conducting and participating in exercises and drills with county, state, federal and private agencies to improve coordination between response agencies.