

What is “pandemic influenza”?

Pandemic influenza refers to a very severe strain of influenza that has the ability to spread across the world. The word, “pandemic”, means that a disease has caused illness in a person on nearly every continent. Many other diseases throughout the history of the world have been pandemic. An example is HIV/AIDS. HIV/AIDS is currently pandemic since it has become widespread throughout the world.

Influenza occurs at different times throughout the world. Influenza season strikes in the U.S. in the fall and winter months likely because people stay inside often and are in close contact with others who may be ill.

What is the difference between influenza (flu) and pandemic influenza?

Influenza (flu) happens every year in nearly every country in the world. It spreads through a population for a few months and then will disappear or will move onto another country. Influenza usually occurs in the fall and winter months. Also, people who usually become ill with influenza are the elderly, the very young and people with chronic medical conditions.

Pandemic influenza could strike at any time in the year. The strain will be one never seen before and there will not likely be a vaccine immediately available. It will spread quicker and easier from person to person compared to non-pandemic influenza. Pandemic influenza may cause illness in any person, and in the past has caused illness in more healthy, middle-aged people than those who usually become ill with influenza. It will probably circulate several times around the world, or in “waves”. Overall, pandemic influenza will cause more disease and death than seasonal influenza.

How often do influenza pandemics occur?

Pandemics of influenza have occurred three times about every 100 years. From 1900-2000, there were three influenza pandemics, all about 30 years apart.

What is Avian or Bird Flu?

Avian influenza is currently making many different types of birds in Asia sick. There are several different types of avian influenza and most types are found in birds. Avian influenza is often found in birds and is not easily spread from birds to people. The type found in birds in Asia right now has spread to a few people, but has not spread from person to person. There is concern about this type of avian influenza because it is a type of influenza that has caused serious illness in people in the past. The influenza virus changes all the time so there is also worry if this type of avian influenza ever changed so that it could spread person to person, many people would become ill.

Can pandemic influenza infect animals?

Influenza infects different types of animals, usually pigs, birds and sometimes horses, cats, dogs and other animals. Pandemic influenza will likely be able to infect animals and may even infect people because of their contact with infected animals.

Most household pets in the U.S. do not carry or are able to catch strains of influenza that make people ill therefore you do not need to worry about your household pet infecting you or your family with influenza during normal influenza season. If pandemic influenza occurs, you may need to take action to protect your pet and your family.

What is the Iowa Department of Public Health doing to prevent and/or prepare for pandemic influenza?

Throughout every “flu season”, usually in the fall and winter months, Iowa Dept. of Public Health (IDPH) tracks the different types of influenza that occur in people who visit their doctor, attend school, child care or live in a long term care facility. IDPH is also developing a pandemic influenza response plan. For more information on influenza, pandemic influenza and avian influenza refer to our website at www.idph.state.ia.us/adper/flu.asp.

Is there a vaccine for pandemic influenza?

Currently, there is not a vaccine for pandemic influenza because we do not know what strain will cause pandemic influenza. Many national governments are working with researchers and scientists on a vaccine against the H5N1 strain of avian influenza, which has infected people and birds in Asia.

Is Iowa stockpiling vaccine for the public?

IDPH is not stockpiling vaccine or antiviral medication for pandemic influenza for three reasons.

- The federal government has started to stockpile antiviral medication.
- For a vaccine to provide protection, it must be specific against the new strain of influenza (the vaccine must “match” the strain causing human illness).
- Even though the federal government has started to stockpile antiviral medication, there is no guarantee this medication will be effective or prevent illness due to a new strain of influenza.

The best preparation and defense for a possible pandemic is the ability to detect and identify a new strain of influenza virus quickly, and then determine the best response measures to limit exposure and spread, and identify medication(s) to effectively treat the disease.

Is there medicine for pandemic influenza?

Depending on the type of influenza, there may be no medicine a limited amount of medicine to treat those who are ill. Once a pandemic strain is identified, then public health officials will have to determine if any current medications may be used or if new ones need to be developed. The federal government is stockpiling antiviral medication in the event that a pandemic of influenza happens. However, there is no guarantee that the medication they are stockpiling will work against the pandemic strain of influenza.

Is Iowa or the U.S. government stockpiling medication for pandemic influenza?

Iowa is not stockpiling medication and does not the Iowa Dept. of Public Health recommend health care professional stockpile antiviral medication. The U.S. government is currently increasing the stockpile of an antiviral drug in the event that it may be effective against the kind of influenza virus causing the pandemic.

How can I protect my family from pandemic influenza?

The best way to protect yourself and others is to do the following:

- Wash your hands frequently with warm water and soap and scrubbing for at least 15 seconds.
- Cover your mouth and nose when coughing or sneezing and to use disposable tissues.
- Use an alcohol-based hand sanitizer when hands are not visibly soiled.
- Get the influenza vaccine every year to significantly lower your chances of getting pneumonia due to influenza.
- People over the age of 65 and others with underlying illness should also receive the pneumococcal vaccine to lower their chances of getting a bacterial pneumonia and / or along with influenza.
- If you are ill, stay home and call your doctor.

Links

- [Information about influenza pandemics \(Centers for Disease Control\)](#)

- [National Pandemic Influenza Preparedness and Response Plan \(Health and Human Services\)](#)
- [WHO](#)