

FREQUENTLY ASKED QUESTIONS ON PANDEMIC INFLUENZA

What is pandemic influenza?

An influenza pandemic occurs when a new form of an influenza virus starts spreading. Because it is a new virus, people have no resistance to it and it therefore spreads easily from person to person worldwide. People are also more likely to become sick in a short period of time. Previous influenza pandemics have led to widespread disease and death.

How is pandemic influenza different from avian influenza?

Avian influenza is a strain of the influenza virus (H5N1) that is generally found in birds, and in a few cases the virus has infected people. Pandemic influenza will occur when this virus or another new strain of the influenza virus changes into a strain that easily infects and spreads among humans.

How is pandemic influenza different from seasonal influenza?

There are several key differences between pandemic and seasonal influenza. Seasonal outbreaks of the flu are caused by flu viruses that are already circulating among people, so they have some resistance to them. Pandemic influenza is caused by a new strain of the virus that people have no resistance to. Because people have no resistance to it, pandemic influenza is likely to infect many more people and cause complications in more otherwise healthy people than seasonal influenza.

What drugs are available for treatment?

WHO and the US Government are investing in the research and development of vaccines to prevent catching the H5N1 virus and medications to treat the H5N1 virus in people. There are several studies being conducted to test the vaccines but these are not ready for wide distribution, and will only work if the pandemic is due to H5N1. Currently, there are two medications (antivirals) that are given to people with seasonal flu that reduce symptoms like aches and pains – they may also shorten the length of the illness and help prevent its spreading. These medications' brand names are Tamiflu and Relenza and their generic names are oseltamivir and zanamivir.

Most medical experts believe these may be helpful during an influenza pandemic but they are not a guarantee. We should not rely on medications to combat pandemic influenza. It could be at least six months into a pandemic before an effective vaccine becomes available, and even then, supplies will be limited and expensive. It is important that we not rely on or plan for a pharmaceutical treatment. Instead, we should plan to practice other measures such as social distancing.

How serious of a threat is pandemic influenza?

It is a very serious public health issue. The leading international health organizations such as the World Health Organization (WHO) and the Food and Agriculture Organization (FAO), along with donor nations, including the US, Great Britain and Japan, have committed financial and human resources to conduct research that will help reduce the threat and minimize the effects of an influenza pandemic.

How can pandemic influenza be spread from person to person?

Pandemic influenza can be spread the same way seasonal influenza is spread - by coughing, sneezing, or touching something that has come in contact with the virus from people's sneezes or coughs. One person can give influenza to another person if they are in close contact (generally within an arm's length). Influenza can spread easily in places where there are many people in close contact. People with influenza can spread the disease even before they have symptoms.

QUESTIONS FOR NATIONAL AND COMMUNITY STAKEHOLDERS

With all the other issues my community has to worry about—why should I invest in an event that may not happen?

Your question is valid. The investment you and your community would make in pandemic planning would be relatively small – mostly your time – and the planning for a pandemic response can be incorporated into existing disaster preparedness activities. The preparation planning would be beneficial in saving lives as well as be reassuring to your community and could be used when there are natural disasters or other public health outbreaks.

The idea of pandemic influenza is overwhelming—what can I do as a *national* official to prepare for it?

Keeping pandemic influenza in perspective is important. Working with your colleagues in the government, civil society, and private sector will make your preparations manageable and successful. There are a few steps you can take that will help you organize and be prepared. These include:

1. Review and update the national pandemic preparedness plan. Bring together a wide variety of organizations and groups to work together. These would include the Ministries of Health, Education, Information, Local Government, Defense, and Interior; the National Disaster Management Office; and national NGOs such as the Red Cross or Red Crescent Society.
2. Initiate planning and training for community-based health care. Include midwives, health promoters, extension workers, teachers, and members of unions or faith groups among the groups to be trained to help with community and household care.
3. Help districts, local governments, NGOs and communities to plan. Bringing together representatives from all groups and organizations to share the activities and planning will make this more manageable.
4. Prepare messages and materials to educate the public. It will be important to have materials ready to inform people what actions they can take in their households if an outbreak occurs.

The idea of pandemic influenza is overwhelming—what can I do as a community official to prepare for it?

Keeping pandemic influenza in perspective is important. Working with your colleagues in the government, civil society, and private sector will make your preparations manageable and successful. There are a few steps you can take that will help you organize and prepare. These are:

1. Establish a district or local-level task force to plan and coordinate preparedness activities. Advocate with community, civic, and faith leaders to become involved. Provide them with key messages to distribute and appropriate contacts and sources of information in the case of a pandemic.
2. Develop local preparedness plans. Keep plans updated and practical. Support the mobilization of community groups to begin pandemic preparedness activities together.
3. Test your plan. Practice what you would do in a pandemic situation and make adjustments that are realistic and practical.
4. Train community health workers and other first responders on how to manage influenza-related illnesses and complications.
5. Plan how to share information about the pandemic to your community. Print and broadcast materials and word-of-mouth information should be prepared and ready to distribute when a pandemic is likely.

What are the benefits to planning now?


There are five key benefits to planning – and they all contribute to reducing the loss of lives.

1. Experts have predicted that the time for final planning and preparations will be a few weeks. Planning ahead is important.
2. Being prepared for a pandemic will help to reduce public panic and anxiety when an outbreak occurs. Learning how to communicate information clearly will help minimize anxiety and risk.
3. The more people that are prepared for a pandemic, the better able health workers and first responders will be to assist greater numbers of people, especially those who need the most help, such as the elderly and people who are already ill with diseases such as HIV, TB, malaria, and chronic illnesses.
4. You will reduce the potential economic and social ramifications of the pandemic.
5. Preparing for a pandemic will help to prepare your country for other disease outbreaks, natural disasters, or other crises.

QUESTIONS FOR THE MEDIA

How serious is the current pandemic risk?

The risk of pandemic influenza is serious. With the H5N1 virus now present in large parts of Asia, the risk that more human cases will occur will continue. Each additional human case increases the chances that the



virus will be transmitted to humans and could develop into a pandemic strain. As the virus spreads to new areas and regions of the world, the chances grow for more human cases to occur, grows. We cannot predict when a pandemic will occur, or how severe it will be, but with each human case the risk becomes greater.

Why is a pandemic such a dreaded event?

Influenza pandemics generate dread because they are unpredictable and most people have never experienced illness to this degree. Plus, the threat of the infection spreading quickly, the severity of the disease, and number of anticipated deaths are staggering. This is why planning how to respond to an influenza pandemic is so important. Although we do not know exactly when a pandemic will happen, or where influenza will first appear, it is very reassuring to know that you and your community have taken the necessary steps to prepare. This can be done by planning and training first responders on the correct procedures and care.

What strategic actions are recommended by the World Health Organization?

In August 2005, WHO sent all countries a document outlining recommended strategic actions for responding to the avian influenza pandemic threat. Recommended actions aim to strengthen national preparedness, reduce opportunities for a pandemic virus to emerge, improve the early warning system, delay initial international spread, and accelerate vaccine development.

Is the world adequately prepared?

WHO has urged all countries to develop preparedness plans. To date, 40 countries have done so. WHO, FAO, and donor countries are urging countries to take the pandemic threat seriously and plan how to minimize the risk. The H2P Initiative (discussed below) is an excellent resource to help countries plan a response to an influenza pandemic.

What can we do to help keep our community calm during a pandemic outbreak?

The first step is to make sure that information being reported is correct and that it comes from a credible source. During a national emergency such as an influenza pandemic the media plays an important role in helping to maintain calm and reduce panic. It does this by continued broadcasting and by stopping rumors and misinformation. Staying in contact with local authorities and experts will help give you access to correct information. The pandemic influenza situation may change rapidly. Keeping people updated through community announcements, television and radio broadcasts, and newspapers helps to eliminate fear. Reliable information is reassuring.

Where can I find more information about pandemic influenza?

There are several regularly updated websites that you can visit that have in-depth information on the pandemic influenza planning and response. These are the World Health Organization's Epidemic and

Pandemic Management Response web site (<http://www.who.int/csr/en/>) and the US Government's Centers for Disease Control (<http://www.cdc.gov/flu/pandemic/healthprofessional.htm>).

CARING FOR PEOPLE WITH PANDEMIC INFLUENZA

Who is most at risk of developing severe disease from pandemic influenza?

Some people are at greater risk for illness and death if they have pandemic influenza, such as people who already have a health problem. For example, people with certain medical conditions, such as tuberculosis or other lung diseases, HIV/AIDS, diabetes, heart problems, or kidney disease, are at a higher risk of having serious problems from pandemic influenza.

How can you be prepared for a pandemic influenza outbreak?

A good way to prepare for pandemic influenza is by knowing how to prevent it, knowing how to treat the symptoms, practicing good health habits, and keeping basic supplies at home, such as food, water, medicines, and cleaning items.

What good respiratory etiquette practices can help prevent the spread of pandemic influenza?

If you are sick, wearing a mask, scarf, or other piece of clean cloth over your mouth and nose may protect others from getting pandemic influenza, and protect you from other illnesses. If you wear a disposable mask over your nose and mouth, throw it away in a trash bin immediately after use. If you wear a cloth over your nose and mouth, wash it with soap and warm water immediately after use.

What good hygiene practices can prevent the spread of pandemic influenza?

There are several good hygiene practices that can help to control the spread of pandemic influenza. They are:

- Do not spit in public. If you are sick, this can spread the disease to others.
- Avoid touching your mouth, nose and eyes with your hands.
- If possible, wash your hands with soap and water before handling food or drink and after coughing or sneezing, using the bathroom, caring for a sick person, or handling garbage or animal waste.
- Regularly clean areas that many people touch, such as door knobs or telephones.
- Keep the household clean; influenza viruses can usually be killed by using soap and water.

It is important to note that you can spread the influenza virus to other people before you are aware you are sick. It is therefore helpful to follow these practices routinely.

What are the benefits of isolation and quarantine?

Keeping sick people and people who have been exposed to pandemic influenza away from others may help to slow the spread of the disease. Slowing the spread of pandemic influenza can provide more time for

health care facilities and families to prepare.

How do you care for those who have pandemic influenza?

As soon as symptoms develop, people should stay home and rest to improve the chances that they will recover from the illness.

If you are caring for someone with pandemic influenza, make sure that they rest and keep them as comfortable as possible. Keep people with pandemic influenza in a separate room or area that is away from others.

How do you protect yourself and your household if you are caring for a person with pandemic influenza?

If you are caring for a person with influenza, take care of your own health first. If you become sick, you will be of little use to those who need you. Wear a mask or cloth over your mouth and nose whenever you are within an arm's length of them. After contact with a sick person or anything the sick person touches, wash your hands with soap and water. Do not touch your eyes, nose, or mouth without first washing your hands with soap and water.

Wash soiled dishes and eating utensils with warm water and soap. It is not necessary to wash eating utensils used by a sick person separately from other utensils. Wash laundry with water and detergent. It is not necessary to separate soiled linen and laundry used by someone with influenza from other household laundry. When doing laundry, do not hold the laundry close to your body or face. Wash your hands with soap and water after handling soiled laundry.

Place tissues used by the sick person in a bag and throw them away with other household waste. Consider placing a bag at the bedside for this purpose.

QUESTIONS ABOUT USAID'S H2P

What is the Humanitarian Pandemic Preparedness Initiative – H2P?

The US Government has recognized the critical potential of a pandemic threat and has joined with its global partners to help countries, especially those believed to be the most vulnerable, to prepare a response to an influenza pandemic. Called Humanitarian Pandemic Preparedness – or H2P – this initiative's overall goal is to minimize the number of deaths from an influenza pandemic.

USAID on behalf of the US Government is providing technical assistance in more than 20 countries to help build the capacity of community health workers and local NGOs, as well as national governments, so they will be able to provide a rapid, coordinated, and effective response. It also is supporting community-level planning on how to organize, coordinate, and deliver an effective humanitarian response.

What organizations are partners in H2P?

USAID is the funder for the H2P Initiative. Its global partners are the International Federation of the Red Cross and Red Crescent Societies (IFRC), the CORE Group, AI.COMM, and InterAction.



What are the countries where H2P is working?

Twenty countries have been identified to conduct assessments and begin pandemic response planning. To date, assessments have been conducted in Egypt, Nepal, Ethiopia, Mali, and Rwanda. Assessments will be conducted in 5 more countries by the end of 2008.