

PANDEMIC

FLU

FREQUENTLY
ASKED QUESTIONS

Pandemic flu and its impact on society



What is pandemic flu?

Flu that spreads rapidly to affect almost all countries and regions around the world. Flu pandemics occur when a new strain of influenza virus appears, which most people have no immunity to. Flu pandemics generally affect more people, cause more severe illness and result in much more serious disruption to society than the 'ordinary' flu we see in the UK each winter.

How often do flu pandemics occur?

Flu pandemics have occurred every few decades. There were three flu pandemics in the last century.

What happened in the previous pandemics?

Previous pandemics affected large numbers of the population, caused many deaths and resulted in severe economic and social disruption.

Previous influenza pandemics

Year	1918-1919	1957-1958	1968-1969
Flu type	'Spanish' Flu	'Asian' Flu	'Hong Kong' Flu
Likely origin	Uncertain*	China	China
Estimated deaths			
Global	50 million	1 million	1 million
UK	250,000	33,000	30,000

*The first documented cases were in Europe/USA

When is the next pandemic due?

No one knows for sure. Intervals between previous pandemics have varied with no recognisable pattern. Also, a pandemic may not follow the usual seasonal pattern of 'ordinary' flu and could occur at any time of the year.

What is the difference between 'ordinary' flu and pandemic flu?

The main differences are summarised in the table below. 'Ordinary' flu is the flu that circulates most of the time and produces the outbreaks we see in the UK every winter. For most people this is an unpleasant though not life-threatening illness. The strains of virus causing this type of flu change from year to year but can be fairly reliably predicted so that an appropriate vaccine can be prepared each year.

Pandemic flu is caused when a new strain of influenza virus emerges which is markedly different from recently circulating strains. These changes cannot be predicted in the same way as the changes in 'ordinary' flu viruses, so a vaccine specifically against the new strain cannot be developed in advance.

Summary of the main differences between 'ordinary' and pandemic flu

'Ordinary' flu	Pandemic flu
Occurs every year	Occurs infrequently. There were three last century
Occurs during the winter	Occurs at any time of the year
Affects 10–15% of the population	Affects around 25% or more of the population
For most people it is an unpleasant but not life-threatening infection	It is a more serious infection for everyone
Most people recover within one or two weeks without requiring medical treatment	Some people will not recover even with medical treatment. Due to the higher severity of illness, there is a greater risk of death
The very young, the very old and people with chronic illness are most at risk of serious illness	People of every age may be at risk of serious illness
Vaccine is available in advance	Vaccine will not be available in advance
Annual vaccination is recommended for those at risk of serious illness	The whole population will be vaccinated when vaccine becomes available
Antiviral drugs are available to treat those at special risk	Antiviral drugs are likely to be in limited supply and will be used to best effect according to how the disease develops

How will we know a pandemic has started?

The World Health Organization monitors influenza activity around the world and will announce the start of a pandemic and will inform governments.

Can a pandemic be prevented at an early stage?

Efforts will be made internationally to try to control a pandemic at an early stage. However, flu is highly infectious and because whole populations will be susceptible to the new virus, it is likely to continue to spread despite efforts to contain it.

How will it spread to the UK?

Most likely through people catching the infection in an affected part of the world and developing symptoms after arriving in the UK.

How will we know it has reached the UK?

The UK has well developed surveillance and its own network of virology laboratories that refer unusual viruses to the National Influenza Reference Laboratory for precise identification. This will help us identify the pandemic strain as early as possible.

How long will the pandemic last in the UK?

It is estimated that pandemic flu will be widespread in the UK within about ten weeks of it first arriving in the country, and will last for about 2-3 months. There may be a second wave of infection a few weeks or months later. These times are estimates, and may change as more information becomes available.

Who will be at risk during a flu pandemic?

Everyone is potentially at risk of catching flu during a flu pandemic, as few, if anyone, will have immunity to the virus. Certain groups or age groups may be at greater risk than others; we will not know for certain who they will be until the virus starts circulating.

How many people in the UK are likely to catch flu during the pandemic?

From past experience, around a quarter (25%) of the population is likely to develop flu, although it could be more.

Are many people likely to die?

This will depend on several factors such as how virulent the virus proves to be, which age groups are mainly affected, how soon vaccine is available and in what quantity and how effective antiviral drugs are in treating people. It is estimated that a pandemic could lead to several million deaths worldwide.

Over 50,000 deaths could occur in the UK.

How will a flu pandemic impact on health services?

A flu pandemic will place considerable pressure on health and social services due to the greatly increased number of patients with influenza requiring treatment both in the community and in hospital, a reduced workforce due to illness, and the general disruption that is likely to occur. The NHS is used to planning for emergencies and would put its plans into action.

How will a flu pandemic impact on business?

Each pandemic is different and the impact on business cannot be fully established until more is known about how a pandemic is evolving. Absences from work will depend largely on the age group most affected by the virus.

A quarter or more of the working population may have to take days off work at some stage during the pandemic. In addition to absence due to illness, some workers may need time off to care for family members or may have difficulty getting to work.

How will other sectors of the community be affected?

A flu pandemic will impact on all sectors of the community through the illness itself and the consequences of staff sickness, travel restrictions, reduced transport and deliveries etc.

Will people be prevented from travelling?

If a pandemic starts outside the UK, people are likely to be advised not to travel to affected areas or attend international gatherings such as large conferences and sports events. Later, depending on how the pandemic develops, it may be necessary to reduce the movement of people within the UK to prevent or delay further spread of the disease.

What contingency plans does the UK have for a flu pandemic?

The UK was one of the first countries to have a flu pandemic contingency plan in place. This was revised in March 2005. The plan provides the overall framework for an integrated UK-wide response, escalating as a pandemic threat increases and then as the pandemic evolves. (Visit www.dh.gov.uk/pandemicflu for further information).

The UK plan seeks to reduce the health impact of a pandemic and the possible disruption it may cause to essential services and people's daily lives. This will be through the best application of measures such as antiviral treatment and immunisation (when this becomes available), and preparing the NHS and society as far as possible.

What preparations are being made in the UK?

Publishing the plan is an important step in preparing for a pandemic. The government is also building up a stockpile of antiviral drugs and working with the World Health Organization, international partners, industry and others to put us in the best possible position to develop a pandemic flu vaccine should the need arise. Improving our preparedness is a continuous process, putting into place the actions described in the plan.

What are antiviral drugs?

Antiviral drugs are special medicines for the treatment of certain viral infections and are likely to play an important role in treating pandemic flu. Treatment with antiviral drugs can be expected to shorten the duration of the disease, alleviate symptoms and reduce complications and serious illness. They can also be used to prevent flu, particularly in the early stages of a flu pandemic.

Does the UK have contingency stockpiles of antiviral drugs?

The UK has a stockpile of antiviral drugs for emergency use and is building this up against the contingency of an influenza pandemic.

Which antiviral drug does the UK government currently have?

In addition to the drugs routinely available in the NHS, the UK is building up its stockpile of oseltamivir.

Do antivirals have side effects?

The antivirals which are likely to be of most use in a pandemic are generally well tolerated, but on occasion they can cause nausea and vomiting.

Why don't we make a vaccine against pandemic flu now?

Because the virus will be new and not predictable in the way that 'ordinary' flu viruses are. Preparatory work is being undertaken to be in the best possible position to produce vaccine against a pandemic strain as quickly as possible when the need arises, but development of a vaccine will take time and a vaccine will not be available in the early stages of a pandemic.

How long would a vaccine take to produce?

On current international estimates, the vaccine will take at least four to six months to produce. There may be further delays due to unexpected technical difficulties. Once the virus has been identified and a suitable vaccine developed then large-scale production will begin as quickly as possible.

Can we be sure the UK will be able to obtain enough vaccine for its own needs?

We will need more vaccine than we would usually use for annual vaccinations. The UK is therefore discussing its requirements with manufacturers.

Does this mean that the vaccine will be prioritised?

Priority may have to be given to certain groups. Healthcare workers and other essential service key workers may need to be vaccinated first, as it will be important to maintain health and other essential services. Those groups most at risk of serious illness will be a priority to receive the vaccine as supplies increase.

Who will make the decision on prioritising?

The government will make the decision based on advice from the Joint Committee on Vaccination and Immunisation (JCVI) (an independent expert advisory committee) and the UK National Influenza Pandemic Committee. The JCVI has provisionally advised the following order for vaccinating people:

- healthcare workers most at risk
- essential service workers
- clinical 'high-risk' groups
- closed communities such as nursing homes
- general population.

Are there any other countermeasures available?

Other public health and 'social distancing' interventions may help to limit or slow the spread of the disease and reduce its impact, especially at the onset of a flu pandemic. These include measures such as hand washing, limiting non-essential travel and discouraging mass gatherings of people.

How will we know what to do?

There will be regular updates on the television, radio and in the national press, telling people what is happening and what to do. People with mild to moderate symptoms will be advised to stay at home. Helplines will be available for advice.

How can I reduce my risk and protect myself and my family?

- Cover your mouth and nose when you sneeze or cough
- If you blow your nose, carefully throw the tissues away into the rubbish
- Wash your hands often – especially after coming in from outside
- Avoid touching your eyes, nose or mouth
- Avoid mass gatherings as far as you can
- Stay at home when you are sick – if you have a cough and a fever, it is best to rest at home, take medicines to relieve the symptoms and drink plenty of fluids. This will speed your recovery and help prevent the spread of infection.

If you need medical advice or assistance, phone NHS Direct on 0845 4647 or your GP surgery .

What is the role of the Health Protection Agency (HPA)?

The HPA is the main agency supporting the public health response to an influenza pandemic in England. It provides specialist public health advice to the Department of Health, the NHS and others and provides virological and epidemiological data on which national decisions, such as the choice of vaccine and use of antiviral agents, will be based. It also provides reference virological and microbiological services to the NHS.

Why are experts concerned about a flu pandemic now?

Experts believe we should be ready for a pandemic to emerge at any time. However, the avian flu (often called 'bird flu') currently affecting poultry and some people in Asia has increased their concern.

What is avian flu?

Avian flu is infection caused by a strain of influenza virus that usually infects wild or domesticated birds (particularly poultry), but occasionally crosses the species barrier and infects people.

How does avian flu affect people?

Until recently, it was thought that avian flu only rarely affected people and caused only mild disease such as conjunctivitis. Since 1997, however, more severe illness has occurred in people infected with avian flu strains, and one strain of bird flu – H5N1 – has been associated with a very high death rate when people have been affected.

Why are we concerned about avian flu?

Experts believe a pandemic virus may emerge from an avian influenza virus, for example if it mixes with a human flu virus, creating a new virus which is highly infectious for people.

The avian (bird) flu that is affecting poultry flocks in Asia at the present time has increased experts' concern. The avian flu virus (H5N1) which is causing these outbreaks has affected some people causing serious illness. Scientists fear that this virus may change with time to make it a more serious threat for people and that it could start another pandemic.

Is there a vaccine for avian flu?

Not at the moment for people. An H5N1 vaccine is being developed against the current H5N1 viruses. However, as these viruses will have to change to cause a pandemic, this vaccine may not then be effective.

Is there a treatment for avian flu?

Antiviral drugs are helpful in treating avian flu. To be effective, antiviral drugs have to be taken within 48 hours of the symptoms starting. The government has a stockpile of antiviral drugs for emergency use and is building up this stockpile against the contingency of a pandemic.

More information can be found at:

- Department of Health
<http://www.dh.gov.uk/pandemicflu>
- Health Protection Agency
<http://www.hpa.org.uk>
- World Health Organization
<http://www.who.int/csr>



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