

Pandemic Influenza: Not Your Ordinary Flu

If you've been paying attention to the news lately, you've probably heard a lot about pandemic flu and bird flu. But with all the media attention, it's hard to separate the hype from the real information. What's the difference between pandemic flu and bird flu? Just how threatening are these diseases? What can you expect during a pandemic? And what can you do to be ready?

Pandemic flu is a worldwide disease outbreak in humans caused by a new influenza virus—one that has not infected humans before. Unlike the seasonal flu viruses we see each winter, most people will not have immunity to a new influenza virus, and no vaccine currently exists to prevent it. So if the virus acquires the ability to pass easily from person to person, it will spread rapidly from one community to another and across the globe.

A severe pandemic flu outbreak can be much more serious than ordinary, seasonal flu. It will infect large numbers of people, and has the potential to cause serious illness. Some of those infected with a pandemic virus will die, and if the virus strain is a particularly severe one, those numbers could be high. If we have a pandemic similar to the "Spanish influenza" pandemic of 1918, 540,000 people in King County could become ill in the first six weeks. Out of that number, experts estimate that 270,000 would need outpatient care, over 59,000 would need hospitalization, and 11,500 would die.

Everyday life won't be the same during a pandemic. To slow the spread of infection, schools may close and public gatherings may be canceled. With so many people ill, caring

for the ill, or staying home with their children, the U.S. workforce may be reduced by as much as forty percent. Services provided by businesses, banks, government offices, and public utilities may be limited. Transportation may be restricted, affecting the delivery of food, fuel, and other essentials to stores and retailers. And unlike other catastrophic events, pandemic flu will hit communities all over the world at the same time. No region will be able to depend on outside assistance since every region will be trying to cope. We will need to pull together as a community to help and support each other through a difficult time that could last months, even over a year.

At this moment, there is no pandemic flu virus circulating. But the current outbreak of bird flu around the world raises concerns that it could change into a human, pandemic flu virus if it develops the ability to spread easily from person to person.

We don't know the exact date when the next flu pandemic will arrive, but we know that flu pandemics **do** happen. In the 20th century alone, large pandemics occurred in 1918, 1958, and 1967. No one can prevent a flu pandemic, but we can all be better prepared for one.



Workers in downtown Seattle during the 1918 influenza pandemic. University of Washington, Special Collections, UW1538