

Pandemic Flu – Guidance For Employers

What is pandemic flu?

Pandemic flu is an outbreak of influenza that affects many countries and millions of people. It is different from the 'normal' winter outbreaks of flu which annually affect a small proportion of the population.

Pandemic flu appears to occur two or three times every century. Unlike the familiar annual outbreaks of flu, which tend to occur in the winter months, pandemic flu may occur at any time of the year. For a pandemic to occur, a new flu virus strain, that has not infected humans before, would need to emerge and be easily transmissible from human to human. There are many different influenza viruses, most of which are believed to reside in birds or mammals (e.g. pigs) and do not affect humans at all. However, it can occasionally happen that a bird or mammal virus evolves – and this new type of virus could be one that is transmissible to humans. It is thought that this is likely to be the cause of the next pandemic.

Basic facts

Pandemic flu will occur only if a new subtype of virus emerges which is easily transmissible from person to person. Because it would be new, there would be little or no pre-existing immunity in the population. This could result in an illness which would cause more serious disease and which could spread quickly.

Flu can affect all age groups and can be associated with complications such as pneumonia. Serious complications tend to occur in the very young or older people and those who have chronic health problems.

How it spreads

Flu, including pandemic flu, is spread from person to person by close contact. The ways in which it can be spread include:

- Being near (usually one metre or less) an infected person who is coughing and or sneezing
- Touching or shaking the hand of an infected person and then touching your mouth, eyes or nose without first washing your hands

- Touching surfaces or objects that have become contaminated with the flu virus and then touching your mouth, eyes or nose without first washing your hands
- Outside the home, in addition to the risk of infection from people coughing and sneezing, transmission of infection may occur through contact with contaminated materials and surfaces – such as rails on buses and trains – and so everyone should wash their hands regularly.

The incubation period (time between catching the infection and becoming ill) for seasonal flu ranges from 1 – 4 days; for most people it will be 2 – 3 days. It is assumed that this will be the case with a pandemic strain as well. Patients are infectious soon after they develop symptoms and can continue to spread the virus typically for up to 5 days (seven for children). People become less infectious as their symptoms subside and once symptoms are gone, they are considered no longer infectious.

Symptoms

The most significant symptoms are the sudden onset of high temperature and cough or shortness of breath. Other symptoms include:

- Muscle aches and pains
- Severe headaches
- Loss of appetite
- Sore throat
- Chest pain

Reducing the risk of infection

In the event of a pandemic, the usual flu vaccines will not be effective. Because it will take laboratories some time to produce sufficient vaccines against the pandemic strain of the flu virus, immunization is unlikely to be available early in the course of a pandemic.

To reduce the spread of the flu virus, those with flu symptoms should be isolated as soon as possible.

To reduce the risk to carers, frequent and thorough hand washing is essential with particular attention to the cleanliness of all items which have been in contact with the ill person. Ensure used tissues are carefully disposed of.

Face masks for use by healthy members of the public are unhelpful or tend to lose efficacy quickly in protecting against the spread of flu in public places.

Treatment

Treatment of both seasonal and pandemic flu is by bed rest, painkillers and drinking lots of fluids.

In a pandemic antiviral drugs will also be available through a National Flu line.

The UK has established a stockpile of antiviral drugs sufficient for the expected numbers of the population to be affected.

Key instructions:

a) For those who may be infected

Do not go into work if you think you have flu and do not return until symptoms have stopped

If staff become unwell at work they should:

- Inform their line manager and leave for home
- Use disposable tissues to cover the mouth when coughing, or both nose and mouth, when sneezing
- Dispose of used tissues appropriately

b) If you are well

- Be scrupulous about hand hygiene, including regular hand washing with soap and water (using alcohol gels where access to water is limited)
- Minimise touching of the mouth, eyes and or nose

These guidelines are based on the latest advice from the Faculty of Occupational Medicine. To read their guidance in full, [click here](#).

For the latest NHS advice and news on the swine flu outbreak, [click here](#).