

## **Caring for Yourself and Others in a Pandemic Influenza**

Influenza (flu) pandemics happen every few decades. They occur in multiple waves of disease outbreaks over a period of a year or longer. Each wave can last six to 12 weeks. Every flu pandemic is different and it is impossible to predict its full impact until the virus starts circulating.

Any influenza is a highly contagious infection of the breathing system—nose, throat, and lungs—caused by influenza viruses. *Seasonal influenza* is caused by viruses that already circulate among people. Most people have some immunity and a vaccine is available to help prevent the flu. The flu season usually starts in the United States in late fall and lasts throughout the winter, sometimes into early spring.

A *pandemic influenza* refers to an outbreak caused by a new flu virus that spreads around the world. The disease can spread easily from person to person because people have little natural immunity. There is no vaccine ready to protect against pandemic influenza because the new virus strain must be identified before a vaccine can be produced, which can take up to six months.

*Avian influenza (bird flu)* is caused by viruses that occur naturally among wild birds and can sometimes be transmitted to humans. There is no human immunity and no vaccine is available.

The full impact of a flu pandemic on any community cannot be predicted. However, a pandemic flu is likely to cause more illness and many more deaths than is currently experienced with the seasonal flu that occurs each year. A pandemic will be unlike any emergency our society has faced in modern times and its impact on the health care industry and other sectors of our society will be significant. The Congressional Budget Office (CBO) assessment of [possible economic effects](#) of an avian flu pandemic concludes that a pandemic involving a highly virulent flu strain (such as the one that caused the pandemic in 1918) could result in a 4.25 percent drop in the U.S. gross national product and could produce a short-run impact on the worldwide economy similar in depth and duration to that of an average postwar recession in the United States.

### **Symptoms and Complications**

The main way influenza viruses spread is from person to person when an infected person coughs, sneezes or talks. When someone with the flu coughs or sneezes, droplets containing the virus are sprayed into the air. Someone else can become infected if they breathe the infected droplets, or touch infected droplets on surfaces and then touch their own eyes, nose or mouth.

People develop flu symptoms one to four days after being infected. They may be contagious and able to spread the virus to others starting from the day before the first symptom develops until five days after symptoms. Children who are infected, as well as adults with weakened immune systems, can spread the virus for more than a week.

In general, the seasonal flu is worse than the common cold and symptoms are more intense. Symptoms of the flu include fever, dry cough, sore throat, runny nose, headache, muscle aches, extreme weakness and tiredness. In some people, the flu can cause serious complications such as

bacterial pneumonia, dehydration and heart failure. In addition, children may have nausea, vomiting and diarrhea. **Pandemic influenza, however, is much more serious than seasonal influenza and is likely to cause many more deaths.**

The people most at risk of complications are:

- Children younger than two years
- Adults 65 and older
- People with weakened immune systems and chronic illnesses such as asthma, congestive heart failure and diabetes

### **Stay Informed—Plan for and Protect Yourself and Others**

Planning for pandemic flu is not just a government issue. Everyone has a responsibility to prepare themselves and their family and to help minimize the spread of a pandemic flu. It is important to understand influenza; learn how to protect yourself and others from catching the flu and how to limit its spread; find out how to manage illness in yourself and others for a pandemic that might disrupt your community for an extended period of time.

**Hand washing** is the most important—and easiest—action each of us can take to prevent the spread of a pandemic flu. See guidance located elsewhere in this issue of *LINKS* regarding important *tips* for self-care and preparing your home for a pandemic flu.

Visit [ANCOR's online pandemic flu web page](#) frequently for updated information. **ANCOR's Government Relations Policy Analyst Yael Boloker ([yboloker@ancor.org](mailto:yboloker@ancor.org)) is the staff contact for information on pandemic flu.**

There are other resources for preparing for pandemic influenza are available. These include:

- [Long-Term Care and Residential Services Checklist](#)
- [Individual and Family Planning and Checklist](#)
- [Business Pandemic Flu Planning Checklist](#)
- [State and Local Planning and Response Activities](#)
- [State Pandemic Plans](#)
- [Webcast on National, State, and Worldwide Response](#)
- [U.S. Department of Health and Human Services](#)
- [Centers for Disease Control and Prevention](#)

Also, check with your **local community emergency management or public health office** to find out if they have set up an **alert network** to provide up-to-the minute online notifications about emergencies. If, they have such a system, sign up for those notifications. If they don't, urge them to set up a community online alert network.