

Pandemic Influenza: *Are we prepared?*

Are we ready for a pandemic?

A major influenza pandemic could have a devastating impact on society. Roughly a third of the population may be sick, and another 10 percent could be reluctant to come to work.

In Minnesota alone, as many as 172,000 people may need hospital-level care, and as many as 30,000 people could die. It will be a major challenge to provide for basics like food, water, electricity and routine health care.

You're never really "done" preparing for an event like that. You can always do more. But Minnesota's public health community has been working very hard to prepare us for a possible pandemic, and a lot has already been done.

What is government doing to prepare for a pandemic?

The government's response to pandemic influenza takes in more than public health. It represents a broadly based, multi-agency approach to a problem with broad implications for society.

In November 2005, the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services (HHS) released a comprehensive plan for responding to a possible pandemic. In that same month, Governor Tim Pawlenty launched a coordinated effort to get Minnesota ready for a possible pandemic, and in April 2006 the state released draft versions of its own pandemic flu plans. In May 2006, the White House released a new implementation plan for the federal pandemic flu response strategy.

Our state's pandemic planning involves a number of state and local government agencies, working in partnership with each other and with the private sector, to do a number of different jobs:

- The **Department of Public Safety** will be responsible for organizing and coordinating our overall response to a pandemic.
- The **Department of Agriculture** and the **Board of Animal Health** will be responsible for protecting our poultry flocks from the threat of "bird flu."

- The **Department of Natural Resources** will play an important role in detecting the presence of the bird flu virus in wild birds and waterfowl – the most likely way that bird flu will make its way to Minnesota.
- The **Minnesota Department of Health** – along with local health agencies and health care providers, all across the state – will work to minimize the impact of a pandemic on human health.

What's being done to protect public health?

Over the last three years, Minnesota's public health community has been building up its capacity to respond to a flu pandemic – or some other type of public health emergency – in a number of ways:

- We have greatly enhanced the ability of our state public health laboratory to handle – and test for – potentially dangerous chemical and biological agents.
- Working with the health care community, state and local public health agencies have strengthened our system for detecting and tracking infectious disease outbreaks.
- Local public health agencies have been conducting an extensive series of drills and exercises designed to test our emergency response readiness.
- Public health agencies have been developing a system for the rapid distribution of medications and vaccines to the public during an emergency.
- Public health has been working with our state's hospitals, on a regional basis, to plan for the care of large numbers of sick people. Plans are being made to provide alternatives to regular hospital care, at a time when hospitals would otherwise be overwhelmed.
- State and local public health agencies are recruiting, training and organizing a corps of health care and public health volunteers, who can provide care and other services during an emergency.
- Strategies are being developed for limiting or slowing the spread of influenza during a pandemic. Infection control procedures are



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being developed for isolating patients and protecting health care workers in hospitals and other health care settings.

- Strategies are also being developed for limiting the spread of illness out in the community – quarantine of people who aren't sick, but may be infectious; closure of schools and businesses; restrictions on travel and public gatherings; and “snow days,” when people will be asked to stay home from work or school for a week or two.
- Plans are also being made to care for the large number of people who could die during a pandemic – as many as 30,000 in Minnesota alone, in a severe pandemic.

What else do we need to do to be ready?

Everybody has a role to play in getting ready for a pandemic.

That includes government agencies at the local, state and federal level. But it also includes the law enforcement and emergency response communities; the hospital and health care communities; the business sector; voluntary agencies and organizations; the academic community and the schools. And it also includes individual citizens and their families.

Businesses – including hospitals and health care providers – need to be ready for a world where as many as 40 percent of their employees may be unwilling or unable to work. Employers need to develop strategies that will limit social contact between employees – including strategies for letting people work at home, whenever possible.

Individuals and families need to develop their own personal emergency plans. They need to start putting together an emergency kit, with enough food, water and supplies to last up to two weeks.

A lot of work has already been done to prepare for a pandemic – but there's still a lot to do. We're better prepared today than we were yesterday – and we'll be better prepared tomorrow than we are today.

Pandemic Influenza: *What it is – and what it isn't*

What is pandemic flu?

An influenza pandemic is a very large outbreak of flu, usually affecting the entire world. A pandemic can happen whenever there is a major change in the virus that causes flu.

Flu viruses change over time. That's why you need to get a flu shot every fall – to protect against the flu strains that will be around during the coming flu season. Usually these changes are gradual – this year's flu viruses won't be that different from last year's viruses.

But when a major change occurs, most people will have little or no immunity to the new virus. Unlike regular flu, one of these new "pandemic" viruses can show up any time of year, and we probably won't have a vaccine for it – at least not right away. Antiviral drugs may or may not work, and they may be in short supply. The resulting wave of illness can spread rapidly across the globe, making many millions of people ill.

Are we headed for a pandemic?

Sooner or later, yes. Pandemics have happened three times in the last century – in 1918, 1957 and 1968. The 1918 pandemic was the worst. It made a third of the population ill, killed tens of millions of people worldwide, and caused widespread social disruption.

Scientists believe that another pandemic is coming, sooner or later. It might be a major pandemic, like the one we had in 1918, or a milder pandemic, like the ones in 1957 or 1968. Either way, we need to be ready.

Is "bird flu" the same as "pandemic flu?"

No. There are many strains of flu that affect animals like birds and pigs, as well as strains that affect people. Over the last few years, one particular strain of bird flu has been spreading across Asia – and more recently, into Africa and Europe. The impact on poultry producers has been very significant, resulting in the loss of tens of millions of birds.

Health officials have been watching this flu strain very closely for another reason: People can sometimes get it from birds. So far that hasn't happened very often – relatively few people have gotten this kind of "bird flu." But for the people who do get it, this flu strain is very dangerous. About half of the people who've gotten it so far have died.

People don't get it very often because they usually don't get it from each other. In a few isolated cases, the virus has spread from person to person, usually within families. But in most cases, people have gotten it from *close contact* with domestic poultry or their droppings. This is still mostly a disease of birds – not a disease of people, and not a pandemic.

Will bird flu end up causing a pandemic?

Right now, we don't know. Unless the virus changes – so that people can get it easily from each other – it is very unlikely to cause a pandemic. Health officials are concerned that might happen, which is why they're keeping a close eye on the situation. Right now, this illness is still almost entirely a disease of birds – not people – and it may or may not end up causing a pandemic. The next pandemic – when it happens – may be caused by a completely different virus. But sooner or later, it's going to happen.

How will a pandemic affect us?

Some pandemics – like the ones in 1957 and 1968 – are relatively mild. But another pandemic like the one in 1918 could have a devastating effect on society. Roughly a third of the population may be sick, and another 10 percent could be reluctant to come to work. In Minnesota alone, as many as 172,000 people could need hospital-level care – in a state with only 8,000 staffed hospital beds – and more than 30,000 people could die.

But the impact of the disease is only part of the picture: The larger challenge may simply be to keep society running, and provide for basics like food, water, electricity and routine health care.

Are we ready for a pandemic?

You're never really "done" preparing for a pandemic. You can always do things to be better prepared.



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A lot of people have already been working very hard to get ready for a possible pandemic. That includes government agencies at the local, state and federal level. But it also includes the law enforcement and emergency response communities; the hospital and health care communities; the business sector; voluntary agencies and organizations; the faith community; the academic community and the schools.

A lot of work has already been done. We have been working on plans for tracking and preventing the spread of disease – before and during a possible pandemic. We have been developing plans for making the best use of whatever vaccines or antiviral drugs may be available. We have been working with health care providers to determine how we will care for very large numbers of sick people.

We have also been making arrangements for care of the tens of thousands of people who may die, here in Minnesota, if we have a major pandemic. We have been conducting exercises, all across the state, to test our readiness for a pandemic or some other type of public health emergency.

What do we need to do right now?

We need to continue our efforts to prepare for pandemic flu and other emergencies – and that includes things we can do as individuals and families.

We all need to have personal and family preparedness plans in place, so we know how to contact each other and stay in touch during an emergency. We need to start putting together a kit of emergency items for our families, with enough food, water and supplies to last up to two weeks.

Our work is not done, but we've made a good start. We're better prepared today than we were yesterday – and we'll be better prepared tomorrow than we are today.

able to completely stop a pandemic in its tracks. A pandemic will have a major impact on our lives – and we need to be ready for that. But together, we can get through it.

Protect yourself and your family

Getting ready for a pandemic starts *now* – and there's a lot you can do.

Stay healthy. Keep yourself in shape. Eat nutritious foods, don't smoke, exercise regularly, and get enough sleep. And get a flu shot every fall, so you're protected against ordinary "seasonal" flu.

Learn how to avoid spreading disease.

Practice "respiratory etiquette." Start developing habits that will help you avoid getting – or spreading – infectious diseases. Cover your nose and mouth with a tissue – or the upper part of your sleeve – when you cough or sneeze. Dispose of the tissue afterward. Wash your hands thoroughly – and frequently. If you don't have access to soap and water, use an alcohol-based, waterless hand cleaner.

Develop a family emergency plan. Know how you'll get in touch with each other – and where you'll gather as a family – in an emergency. Know where you'll go, and what you'll do. Keep a list of emergency phone numbers in a handy place. Know what routes you will use if you have to evacuate. Store emergency numbers in your cell phones under "ICE" ("In Case of Emergency"), so someone else can call your emergency numbers if you're not able to. Use more than one entry ("ICE-1," "ICE-2," etc.) if you have more than one emergency number.

Create an emergency kit. Make sure your kit has everything you'll need to get by if you have to remain at home for a period of time – up to two weeks, if possible. Be sure to include:

- A supply of drinking water (one gallon per person per day) and nonperishable food.
- Basic equipment like a flashlight, battery-operated radio, and a supply of batteries. Be sure to include a manual can opener.
- Personal care products – soap, toiletries, waterless hand cleaner, extra glasses or contact lenses, prescription and over-the-counter drugs, tissues and toilet paper, and any special items for infants or people with special health needs.
- A good first aid kit.
- Kitchen utensils and dishwashing supplies.

No matter how much we prepare for it, we won't be



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- Extra clothing and bedding.
- Critical miscellaneous items – notebook & pen, whistle, money & credit cards, extra car keys, medical and insurance information, and copies of other important documents.
- Games, reading material, and other entertainment items – for children and adults. You might need to stay home for a while during a pandemic.

Get more information. To learn more about preparing for a pandemic, go to the Minnesota avian/pandemic website at www.birdflu.state.mn.us – or the federal pandemic website at www.pandemicflu.gov.

Prepare your community

Find out what your own community is doing to prepare for a pandemic – public health and emergency response agencies, business, schools, voluntary agencies and organizations. Find out where you fit in and how you can help. Schools and the business community have an especially important role.

For business:

- Develop and test a pandemic plan for your business. Include plans for maintaining operations during a pandemic.
- Determine how you will get reliable information during a pandemic, and share it with your employees.
- Prepare for the possible impact of a travel or transportation ban on your operations, and develop policies for travel to and from areas affected by the pandemic.
- Educate your employees about pandemic flu, and the measures necessary to slow the spread of a pandemic.
- Develop strategies to help employees eliminate unnecessary face-to-face contact with customers and other workers – like staggered work schedules, office layout, seating arrangements in meetings, or use of telecommuting.
- Encourage workers to stay home when they're sick and practice good respiratory hygiene (covering coughs and sneezes, hand washing, etc.)
- Anticipate possible increases – or decreases – in the demand for your products or services.

For schools:

- Learn how your school – or school system – will fit into the larger emergency response system for your community. Determine how the decision to close schools will be made, who will do it, and how it will be announced.
- Identify strategies for providing education services to students during a school closure – web, phone trees, mailed lessons and assignments, radio and television.
- Determine how you will communicate with staff, students and families during all phases of a pandemic.
- Emphasize the importance of respiratory hygiene for students and staff. Make sure that soap or waterless hand cleaner – and other supplies – are available to encourage hand washing and other positive behaviors.
- Establish clear sick leave policies that encourage sick people to stay home.
- Be prepared to deal with issues of language and culture in communicating with students and families about a pandemic.

For everybody:

- Get to know your neighbors – and find out what you can do to look out for each other during a pandemic or some other type of emergency. Pool your resources so you can be better prepared.
- Identify the support systems you will rely on during an emergency – churches and faith communities, social or fraternal organizations, voluntary groups and organizations, etc.
- Figure out how you'll keep up on the latest information during an emergency – TV, radio, phone contact, posting of information in public locations, etc. Allow for the fact that some communication systems may be down temporarily.
- For more information on how to prepare yourself and your community, go to

www.birdflu.state.mn.us

or

www.pandemicflu.gov.