

## What Workers Need to Know About Pandemic Flu

### Basic Facts for Workers About Pandemic Flu

When pandemic flu arrives in the United States, it will have huge effects on our nation and its workplaces. Millions of people will become sick and die. Our health care facilities will be overwhelmed with sick patients, absenteeism will go up, and the economy will slow down. During a pandemic, many workers will be at risk of being exposed to the pandemic flu virus at work and becoming sick themselves.

In order to protect workers from exposure, it is essential that workplaces plan and prepare for the safety and health issues of pandemic flu before it arrives. Employers need to **put infection control measures and emergency plans into place at work before a pandemic arrives** so that workers are fully protected **in advance of** the arrival of pandemic flu.

What is a pandemic? A pandemic is a rapid spread of a disease in a large region of the world. A pandemic flu would occur when:

- there is a new influenza virus that causes serious illness and death,
- people have little natural immunity to it, and
- the virus is capable of spreading easily from person to person.

Because no one would have any immunity to this new flu virus, everyone would be at risk of becoming infected and suffering serious illness or death. Right now there is no pandemic flu in the world.

Recently, pandemic flu and avian flu have received increased attention in the news. Workers need to understand the differences between these types of flu and the common flu and why there is serious cause for concern.

## **Seasonal (Common) Flu**

The seasonal flu is caused by the influenza virus. It is a contagious infection that is transmitted from person to person and happens every year, generally during the winter. Seasonal flu causes fever, runny nose, sore throat, muscle pain and coughing. Healthy adults are not usually at risk of experiencing any life-threatening complications with seasonal flu but the elderly and very young can develop serious effects such as pneumonia.

Seasonal flu can usually be prevented by a vaccine (“flu shot”) that is available each year, and most people have some immunity to seasonal flu from previous exposure to the virus. There are several antiviral medicines to treat people infected with seasonal flu and these drugs can also be used to prevent influenza.

Seasonal flu affects 5% to 20% of the United States’ population each year. More than 200,000 are hospitalized with complications and about 36,000 people die annually.

## **Avian Flu**

The avian flu (“bird flu”) is caused by an influenza virus that naturally infects wild birds and domestic birds such as chickens. The H5N1 form of the virus has killed millions of domestic birds around the world since 1997. Humans can become infected with the H5N1 avian flu virus if they come into direct contact with infected birds. Humans can also get avian flu from direct contact with equipment or surfaces contaminated with body fluids or feces of infected birds. Workers who work with infected poultry are at high risk of developing avian flu.

So far, it has been very rare for the avian flu to be transmitted from human to human. There is no human immunity to the avian flu and a vaccine has not yet been developed. Certain antiviral medicines may be useful in treating humans with H5N1 avian flu.

Humans infected with avian flu develop symptoms similar to seasonal flu – fever, cough, sore throat and muscle aches. However, avian flu is much

more serious and can cause life-threatening complications like pneumonia, even in healthy people. Around 60% of all people who are infected with avian flu die. Several hundred deaths have occurred around the world since 2003, mainly in Asia and the Middle East. The H5N1 virus has not yet been found in the United States.

## **Pandemic Flu**

Scientists are very concerned that the avian flu virus could change (“mutate”) so that it becomes easily transmitted from human to human. This could result in a “pandemic” – a global outbreak of this new mutated flu. Millions of people around the world would become seriously ill or die.

In a severe flu pandemic in the United States, 90 million people could become sick, 9.9 million could be hospitalized, and 1.9 million deaths are projected to occur. There is no vaccine for pandemic flu to protect people before a pandemic begins and it will take about six months after a pandemic begins before a vaccine could be developed. It is also not clear if existing antiviral medications will be effective against a pandemic flu virus.

## **Impact on the Community and Workplace**

An influenza pandemic will have a huge impact on worker communities. Because people will have little or no immunity, the virus will spread rapidly around the world. In the United States, 25% to 35% of our population could become sick. Millions of people will require medical care, overloading our health care system. Normal life will be changed dramatically when travel bans are put in place, schools and businesses are closed, and public events are cancelled in order to limit contact between people (“social distancing”) to reduce the spread of the virus.

Health care workers and emergency responders will be at greatest risk of being exposed to the pandemic flu virus. Workers who have close and frequent contact with the public will also be at high risk. Absenteeism could reach as high as 40% to 60% during the peak of the influenza pandemic. Workers could be absent from work because they are sick, caring for a

family member who is sick, or staying home to care for children when schools are closed.

## **Protecting Workers**

Because it will take up to six months before a vaccine against the pandemic flu virus is available and antiviral medications may not be completely effective, **putting infection control measures and emergency plans into place at work before a pandemic arrives** will be the most important action to make sure workers are protected. It is essential that employers begin planning now so they are prepared to respond immediately when a pandemic occurs.