

From the Chief Medical Officer
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URGENT COMMUNICATION

HSS(MD) 32/2005

To:
Chief Executives, Health and Social Services Boards and Trusts
Directors of Public Health, Health & Social Services Boards
Director of Nursing, Health & Social Services Boards
Directors of Pharmaceutical Services, Health & Social Services
Boards, Trusts and CSA
GP Medical Advisers, Health & Social Services Boards
Consultants in Communicable Disease Control, Health and Social
Services Boards
All Community Pharmacists
Medical Directors, Health & Social Services Trusts (for onward
distribution to all Consultants)
Nursing Directors, Health & Social Services Trusts (for onward
distribution to all Community Nurses)
All General Practitioners (for onward distribution to practice staff
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Dear Colleague

AVIAN INFLUENZA AND PANDEMIC INFLUENZA

This letter is to give you further information on current concerns about avian influenza and plans to combat the threat of a pandemic influenza. It may be of help in answering questions or concerns that your patients may have.

As you will know, avian or bird flu is not the same thing as pandemic flu. Outbreaks of avian 'flu have occurred around the world over the last five years mainly in the Far East but more recently in Europe. As well as poultry and some wild birds, a small number of poultry workers or people in close proximity to sick birds have been affected.

The avian flu virus (H5N1) cannot cause population-wide influenza infections because it does not currently have the capacity of easy transmission from person to person. For this to happen, one of the current avian flu (H5N1) viruses would have to change its character whether by resorting genetic material with a human influenza virus or by adapting (i.e. mutating).

This could happen resulting in a new pandemic of influenza. Alternatively, a new influenza strain unrelated to the current avian flu virus could emerge and be the source of a pandemic. At some point, a flu pandemic is inevitable, but we don't know when. The last three were in 1918/19 (Spanish flu), 1958 (Asian flu) and 1968/9 (Hong Kong flu).

You can find the latest version of the Northern Ireland contingency plan at <http://www.dhsspsni.gov.uk> This is simply an update of the version published in March 2005.

QUESTIONS YOU MIGHT BE ASKED

AVIAN FLU

What is avian flu?

Avian flu is infection caused by a strain of influenza virus that usually infects wild or domesticated birds (particularly poultry), but occasionally crosses the species barrier and infects people. This is what we have seen recently in the cases in South East Asia.

How does avian flu affect people?

Until recently, it was thought that avian flu only rarely affected people and caused only mild disease such as conjunctivitis. Since 1997, however, more severe illness has occurred in people who have become infected with avian flu strains following close exposure to infected birds. One strain of bird flu – H5N1 – has been associated with a very high death rate when people have been affected.

Why are we concerned about avian flu?

Experts believe a pandemic virus may emerge from an avian influenza virus, for example if it mixes with a human flu virus, creating a new virus which is highly infectious for people.

The avian (bird) flu that is affecting poultry flocks in Asia and other regions at the present time has increased experts' concern. The avian flu virus (H5N1) which is causing these outbreaks has affected some people who have been in close contact with infected birds causing serious illness. Scientists fear that this virus may change with time to make it a more likely threat for people and that it could start another pandemic.

Is there a vaccine for avian flu?

Not at the moment. An H5N1 vaccine is being developed against the current H5N1 viruses.

Is there a treatment for avian flu?

Antiviral drugs are likely to be helpful in treating avian flu. To be effective, antiviral drugs have to be taken within 48 hours of the symptoms starting. The Department has a stockpile of antiviral drugs for emergency use and is building up this stockpile against the start of a pandemic.

Should I not travel to countries with avian flu?

There are no travel restrictions for persons travelling to South East Asia. However, previously recommended advice should continue to be exercised by those who are travelling to these regions:

- avoid visiting live animal markets and poultry farms
- avoid contact with surfaces contaminated with animal faeces
- do not attempt to bring any live poultry products back to the UK.

Further information can be found on the DHSSPS, Department of Health and Foreign and Commonwealth Office websites.

I've just come back from a country where there's avian flu, and I feel ill – what should I do?

It is highly unlikely that avian influenza is the cause, and much more likely that human influenza will be responsible because normal influenza circulates in many areas of Southeast Asia from winter to spring. However, if you develop a respiratory illness which you consider is severe enough to warrant treatment and

- you have visited a country affected by highly pathogenic avian influenza, and
- you have had contact with live poultry (chickens, ducks, geese) or pigs or places that house them in the these countries in the seven days prior to onset of illness,

you should contact your general practitioner by telephone. Your GP will obtain further advice if necessary.

Is it safe to eat poultry or game?

The Food Standards Agency considers that there is no evidence of infection due to eating poultry meat that has been thoroughly cooked. The virus can survive in faecal material from infected birds and can be spread through inhalation and ingestion, but is destroyed by cooking.

PANDEMIC FLU AND ITS IMPACT

Why are experts concerned about a flu pandemic now?

Experts believe we should be ready for a pandemic to emerge at any time. The avian flu (often called 'bird flu') currently affecting poultry in South East Asia and other regions, including Turkey and Romania, has increased their concern.

What is pandemic flu?

Flu that spreads rapidly to affect almost all countries and regions around the world. Flu pandemics occur when a new strain of influenza virus appears, which most people have no immunity to. There were three flu pandemics in the last century. They generally affect more people, cause more severe illness and result in much more serious disruption to society than the 'ordinary' flu we see in Northern Ireland each winter.

What happened in the previous pandemics?

Previous pandemics affected large numbers of the population, caused many deaths and resulted in severe economic and social disruption. 'Spanish' flu occurred just after the First World War and caused millions of deaths worldwide. 'Asian' flu in the late 1950s and 'Hong Kong' flu in the late 1960s were less severe, but had serious consequences globally.

When is the next pandemic due?

No one knows for sure. Intervals between previous pandemics have varied with no recognisable pattern. Also, a pandemic may not follow the usual seasonal pattern of 'ordinary' flu and could occur at any time of the year.

What is the difference between 'ordinary' flu and pandemic flu?

'Ordinary' flu is the flu that circulates most of the time and produces the winter flu we see every year. For most people this is an unpleasant though not life-threatening illness. The strains of virus causing this type of flu change from year to year but can be fairly reliably predicted so that an appropriate vaccine can be prepared each year.

Pandemic flu is caused when a new strain of influenza virus emerges which is markedly different from recently circulating strains. These changes cannot be predicted in the same way as the changes in 'ordinary' flu viruses, so a vaccine specifically against the new strain cannot be developed in advance.

Should I have an ordinary flu jab? Will this protect me against pandemic flu?

We recommend vaccination for all those 65 and over and those who suffer from illnesses that put them at higher risk from flu - such as asthma, diabetes or serious heart or lung conditions. If

you are someone who has been advised to have flu vaccination, please make sure you have made your appointment with your GP practice.

This vaccine will not prevent someone from getting pandemic flu or avian flu, but it will protect them from the seasonal flu that will be circulating this winter.

Who will be at risk during a flu pandemic?

Everyone is potentially at risk of catching flu during a flu pandemic, as few people, if anyone, will have immunity to the virus. Certain groups or age groups may be at greater risk than others; we will not know for certain who they will be until the virus starts circulating. From past experience, around a quarter (25%) of the population is likely to develop flu, although it could be more.

Are many people likely to die?

This will depend on several factors such as

- how virulent the virus proves to be,
- which age groups are mainly affected,
- how soon vaccine is available and in what quantity and
- how effective antiviral drugs are in treating people.

It is estimated that a pandemic could lead to several million deaths worldwide. Over 50,000 deaths could occur in the UK about 1500 in Northern Ireland.

What contingency plans does the UK have for a flu pandemic?

The UK was one of the first countries to have a flu pandemic contingency plan in place. The 1997 plan was revised in March 2005 and again in October 2005. The plan provides the overall framework for an integrated UK-wide response, escalating as a pandemic threat increases and then as the pandemic evolves.

The Northern Ireland plan seeks to reduce the negative health impact of a pandemic and the possible disruption it may cause to essential services and people's daily lives. This will be through the best application of measures such as antiviral treatment and immunisation (when this becomes available), and preparing the HPSS and society as far as possible.

What preparations are being made in?

Publishing the plan is an important step in preparing for a pandemic. The Department is stockpiling enough treatment courses of antiviral drugs to treat those who may become ill in a pandemic. The UK Government is working with the World Health Organization, international partners, industry and others to develop a pandemic flu vaccine should the need arise. Improving preparedness is a continuous process, putting into place the actions described in the plan.

What are antiviral drugs?

Antiviral drugs are special medicines for the treatment of certain viral infections and are likely to play an important role in treating pandemic flu. Treatment with antiviral drugs can be expected to shorten the duration of the disease, alleviate symptoms and reduce complications and serious illness.

VACCINE

Why don't we make a vaccine against pandemic flu now?

Because the virus will be new and not predictable in the way that 'ordinary' flu viruses are. Preparatory work is being undertaken to be in the best possible position to produce vaccine against a pandemic strain as quickly as possible when the need arises, but development of a vaccine will take time and a vaccine will not be available in the early stages of a pandemic.

How long would a vaccine take to produce?

On current international estimates, the vaccine will take at least four to six months to produce. There may be further delays due to unexpected technical difficulties. Once the virus has been identified and a suitable vaccine developed then large-scale production will begin as quickly as possible.

Does this mean that the use of vaccine will be prioritised?

Priority may have to be given to certain groups. Health and social care workers and other essential service key workers may need to be vaccinated first, as it will be important to maintain health and other essential services. Those groups most at risk of serious illness will be a priority to receive the vaccine as supplies increase. The government will make the decision based on advice from the Joint Committee on Vaccination and Immunisation (JCVI) (an independent expert advisory committee) and the UK National Influenza Pandemic Committee.

GENERAL ADVICE

Are there any other countermeasures available?

Other public health and 'social distancing' interventions may help to limit or slow the spread of the disease and reduce its impact, especially at the onset of a flu pandemic. These include measures such as hand washing, limiting non-essential travel and discouraging mass gatherings of people.

How will we know what to do?

There will be regular updates on the television, radio and in the national press, telling people what is happening and what to do. People with mild to moderate symptoms will be advised to stay at home. Helplines will be available for advice.

How can I reduce my risk and protect myself and my family?

- Cover your mouth and nose when coughing or sneezing, using a tissue whenever possible
- Dispose of dirty tissues promptly and carefully – bag and bin them
- avoid non-essential travel and large crowds of people whenever possible
- Maintain good hygiene – washing hands frequently with soap and water protects against picking the virus up from surfaces and passing it on
- Clean hard surfaces (e.g. kitchen worktops, door handles) frequently, using a normal cleaning product
- Stay at home when you are sick – if you have a cough and a fever, it is best to rest at home, take medicines to relieve the symptoms and drink plenty of fluids. This will speed your recovery and help prevent the spread of infection.