



Department of
**Health, Social Services
and Public Safety**

An Roinn
**Sláinte, Seirbhísí Sóisialta
agus Sábháilteachta Poiblí**

www.dhsspsni.gov.uk

PANDEMIC FLU



KEY FACTS

Pandemic influenza (flu)

Key facts

1. The disease

- Pandemic flu is a type of influenza that spreads rapidly to affect most countries and regions around the world.
- Unlike the 'ordinary' flu that occurs every winter in the UK, pandemic flu can occur at any time of year.
- Pandemics of influenza have occurred sporadically throughout history – three times in the last hundred years – resulting in many deaths.
- Experts predict another pandemic will occur but cannot say exactly when it will happen. When it does, it may come in two or more waves several months apart. Each wave may last two to three months.
- Pandemic flu is more serious than 'ordinary' flu. As much as a quarter of the population may be affected – maybe more.
- Pandemic flu is likely to cause the same symptoms as 'ordinary' flu. The symptoms may be more severe because nobody will have any immunity or protection against that particular virus.
- A serious pandemic is likely to cause many deaths, disrupt the daily life of many people and cause intense pressure on health and other services.
- Each pandemic is different, and until the virus starts circulating, it is impossible to predict its full effects.

2. What is it caused by?

- Pandemics of flu are due to the emergence of a new flu virus which is markedly different from recently circulating strains. Few – if any – people will have any immunity to this new virus. This allows it to spread widely, easily and to cause more serious illness.



3. Who's at risk?

- Once a flu pandemic starts everybody will be at risk of catching pandemic flu. Certain groups may be at greater risk than others: until the virus starts circulating we will not know for sure who the risk groups will be.

4. Is there a vaccine to protect against pandemic flu?

- Medicines called antivirals can be used to **treat** pandemic flu but their effectiveness won't be known until the pandemic virus is circulating.
- There is no vaccine ready to **protect** against pandemic flu. A vaccine to protect against pandemic flu cannot be made until the new virus has been identified. Before a pandemic starts it is difficult to predict what strain will cause it and even then, predictions may prove wrong. Also, the new virus may have changed enough for a pre-prepared vaccine to be ineffective.

'Ordinary' flu vaccines will not protect against pandemic flu. But 'ordinary' flu can be serious so it is very important that everyone who is due an 'ordinary' flu jab has one.

5. What is the government doing to prepare for a flu pandemic?

- The government has prepared a UK-wide Influenza Pandemic Contingency Plan which will be put into action in the event of a pandemic. The Plan includes initiatives to improve our preparedness now, before another pandemic occurs.
- HPSS staff will be aware of the contingency planning for an influenza pandemic and how to cope with the demands that are likely to be placed on them.
- The government is building up its stocks of antiviral drugs. They will be used in the most effective way to treat those most at risk of serious illness based on how the disease develops.
- If pandemic flu reaches the UK, there will be announcements in the newspapers, and on radio and TV, and advice will be given on the best course of action to take. This will include simple hygiene measures and treatment advice.
- The government is taking steps to be in the best position for a vaccine to be manufactured as rapidly as possible when a pandemic virus is identified. Manufacture is still likely to take several months and vaccine will not be available at the start of a new pandemic.

6. What can I do?

- You can reduce, but not eliminate, the risk of catching or spreading influenza during a pandemic by:
 - covering your nose and mouth when coughing or sneezing, using a tissue when possible
 - disposing of dirty tissues promptly and carefully – bag and bin them
 - avoiding non-essential travel and large crowds whenever possible
 - maintaining good basic hygiene, for example washing your hands frequently with soap and water to reduce the spread of the virus from your hands to your face, or to other people.
 - cleaning hard surfaces (e.g. kitchen worktops, door handles) frequently, using a normal cleaning product
 - making sure your children follow this advice.
- If you do catch flu:
 - stay at home and rest
 - take medicines such as aspirin, ibuprofen or paracetamol to relieve the symptoms (following the instructions with the medicines). **Children under 16 must not be given aspirin or ready made flu remedies containing aspirin**
 - drink plenty of fluids.

These measures are for your own health and to avoid spreading the illness to others.

More information will be given at the time of a pandemic through leaflets, websites and the media. Such information will tell you how you can protect yourself and your family and what to do if you think you are infected. Some people will be recommended treatment – further information will be given at the time.

For more information:

- visit www.dhsspsni.gov.uk/phealth/pandemic/pandemic.asp
- call the Northern Ireland Health Emergency Helpline on 0845 070 1449
- visit www.dh.gov.uk/pandemicflu and www.immunisation.nhs.uk
- pick up the leaflet *Pandemic flu* from your doctor's surgery or clinic.