

PUBLIC HEALTH FACT SHEET

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INFLUENZA: Birds, Pandemics and Protecting Yourself

What is influenza?

Influenza (the “flu”) is an illness with fever, headache, sore throat, cough and muscle ache, caused by the influenza virus. “Seasonal” flu occurs every year, usually during the late fall and winter. Getting a flu vaccine can prevent seasonal flu, but because the virus changes each year, and the effect of the vaccine does not last long, a new shot and often a new vaccine, is needed each year.

How can people catch the flu?

The flu is spread person to person. People with the flu can spread their infection before they have symptoms as well as during the time they have the flu. The flu is spread through wet droplets that are produced when people cough, sneeze, or speak. If these infectious droplets get to the nose, mouth or eyes they may cause the flu. If these droplets get on hands or contaminate surfaces, they may be brought to the nose, mouth or eyes and cause the flu.

How can I avoid getting the flu?

It is important to avoid exposure to infectious droplets by keeping a distance of at least 3 feet from ill people and washing hands (or using alcohol rub or gel) before touching your nose, mouth or eyes. People with the flu should cover their nose and mouth when coughing or sneezing, dispose of tissues without contaminating hands or other surfaces, and wash their hands regularly or use an alcohol rub or gel. The best way to avoid getting seasonal flu is to get the flu vaccine every year and to wash your hands frequently.

What is avian (bird) flu?

Avian (or bird) flu is an infection of birds caused by a virus that is different from viruses that cause the flu in people. In birds, the infection may be severe, mild or cause no disease at all. People get infected with bird flu only very rarely (usually only after very close contact with infected birds) and the infection does not pass from person-to-person.

What is pandemic flu?

Approximately every 20-40 years, a new strain of the flu virus appears which is very different from the ordinary seasonal flu virus. Because most people do not have immunity to this new strain of flu virus, it can spread to many people, across the world, over a short period of time. Existing types of vaccines will not prevent people from getting this new type of flu, and a vaccine to prevent illness from the new strain typically takes 5-6 months to develop, long after a pandemic begins. The most recent flu pandemics occurred in 1889-90, 1918, 1957 and 1968.

Another pandemic may occur at any time. Flu illness during pandemics is similar to the flu that occurs every year, but pandemics can start at any time during the year, not just the typical “winter flu” season.

Should I worry about bird flu viruses?

Bird flu rarely passes from birds to people. Humans have caught bird flu only through direct and close exposure to infected poultry. Bird flu is not passed from person to person. If, however, the bird flu virus changes into a human virus, this new flu virus can rapidly pass from person to person leading to a flu pandemic in the human population. To date, this has not happened.

Should I worry about a flu pandemic?

Pandemic flu is a serious concern for everyone because a pandemic can be very disruptive and put a great deal of stress on health care, distribution systems and social order. A pandemic is a rare event, but it can occur at any time.

How can I protect myself from bird flu?

The best way to protect yourself from bird flu is to avoid close contact with infected birds. If you work with poultry, you should follow U.S. Department of Agriculture guidelines to protect your birds and yourself and to prevent spread of the virus. Should you come in contact with a person who is infected with a bird virus, it is very unlikely you will become infected even if you take no special precautions. However, because of the level of concern about bird flu in people, rigorous precautions are recommended for healthcare settings, including isolating the patient in a special room and using special procedures.

How can I protect others and myself from pandemic flu?

You can protect yourself and others from pandemic flu the same way as you can protect yourself from seasonal flu. Wet droplets spread pandemic flu. Wash your hands often with soap and warm water, or use an alcohol-based hand sanitizer. Avoid touching your nose, mouth or eyes. Cover your mouth when you cough or sneeze. Never cough in the direction of someone else. Cough or sneeze into a tissue or the inside of your elbow. Clean things that are touched often like door handles, telephones, etc. Avoid holding, hugging, kissing, or shaking hands with anyone who has a cold or the flu.

What is “social distancing”?

“Social distancing” is the term used to describe various ways of slowing the spread of a pandemic flu by avoiding having people congregate in large groups where transmission of the flu to a lot of people would be likely. Closing schools and theatres, canceling large public events, etc. during a flu pandemic are examples of “social distancing”.

Should the public be stockpiling Tamiflu?

No. Tamiflu is a prescription antiviral medicine used to reduce the severity of flu symptoms, not a vaccine that prevents flu. It should be taken only under the care of a doctor, because, as with any medicine, for some people, anti-viral medication may be harmful. Not using antivirals properly may result in flu viruses becoming resistant to Tamiflu and making the medication useless.

Why don't we have a vaccine against pandemic flu?

Flu viruses are changing all the time and a pandemic is likely to be caused by a virus that is new to people. It is difficult to make large amounts of vaccine without knowing the exact pandemic flu strain. Supplies will not be available world-wide until the first wave of flu is already over. Even then, supplies will be limited due to disruption in production and distribution systems as a result of wide-spread illness.

What about masks or respirators (e.g. N95) for personal protection?

Masks and respirators are not generally recommended. There is no evidence that either masks or respirators help prevent the spread of the flu in the general population. However, masks may be useful as part of respiratory hygiene/cough etiquette when worn by someone who is sick (to reduce the number of droplets being released) or by people working with those who are infected as part of precautions to prevent droplets from landing on the nose or mouth. A towel, handkerchief, or other piece of cloth may function as a mask. If a mask is used, care must be taken to dispose of it safely so as not to contaminate the hands, surfaces, or other people.

Is it safe to cook and eat chicken, other poultry and eggs?

Yes. It is safe to continue eating poultry and eggs. There is no evidence to suggest that you can become infected with bird flu by eating properly cooked poultry and eggs. No poultry or poultry products from countries affected with the bird flu are legally allowed to enter the United States.

For more information about seasonal flu, pandemic flu or avian flu, please visit the websites listed below or contact the Massachusetts Department of Public Health, Division of Epidemiology and Immunization at 617-983-6800.

- **Massachusetts Department of Public Health website on influenza**
<http://www.mass.gov/dph/flu>
- **Federal government website for information on pandemic and avian flu**
<http://pandemicflu.gov>
- **Center for Disease Control (CDC) websites on pandemic and avian flu**
<http://www.cdc.gov/flu/avian>; <http://www.cdc.gov/flu/pandemic>
- **US Department of Agriculture website on avian flu**
<http://www.usda.gov/birdflu>
- **World Health Organization (WHO) website on avian flu**
www.who.int/csr/disease/avian_influenza/en/index.html