

Pandemic Preparedness FAQ

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What is a pandemic?

People are exposed to different strains of influenza virus many times during their lives. Each bout of flu helps people build up some immunity to the next strain of virus that comes along. Occasionally, however, a radical change takes place in the genetic material of the influenza A virus. The change is so complete that people have no protection against the new subtype. It spreads rapidly around the world, causing what is known as a pandemic. The last three pandemics occurred in 1918-19, 1957-58 and 1968-69.

How severe will the influenza pandemic be?

Given the unpredictable nature of influenza A viruses, neither the timing nor the severity of the next pandemic can be predicted with any certainty. The effect in Alberta could be broad and severe. Compared to a non-pandemic year there could be 4 to 7 times as many hospitalizations due to influenza and 8 to 20 times as many deaths.

Will the bird flu I've read about cause the next pandemic?

Maybe. Scientists agree that avian influenza (H5N1) is the influenza strain with the most potential to become a pandemic. The more people H5N1 infects, the greater the likelihood the virus will mutate into a new strain with the ability to transmit efficiently from person to person. If it does, the virus would spread rapidly and result in significant illness, death and social disruption.

How is influenza spread?

You get influenza from breathing droplets that have been sneezed or coughed into the air by someone with the flu, or having the droplets land on the surface of your eye. You can also get the flu by shaking hands with an infected person or touching a contaminated surface and then touching your eyes, nose or mouth.

How can I stay healthy and prevent the spread of influenza?

Get your annual flu shot. It's always wise and it could help protect you if a pandemic virus arises from a mix of existing strains. Wash your hands frequently. Twenty seconds of hand washing with warm water and soap or an alcohol-based hand sanitizer helps remove viruses. Remember to wash before and after eating, after using the bathroom, after coughing or sneezing and after touching surfaces you suspect have been contaminated by other people. You should also cover up when you cough or sneeze, keep shared surfaces clean and stay home if you get sick.

Questions and answers continue on the back



Michener Services

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What is Michener Services doing to protect staff and the people we support?

Michener has created and tested a Pandemic Preparedness Plan. It addresses the possibility that 1/3 to 1/2 of our staff will be absent because of illness or family obligations at the height of a pandemic. We have increased medical supplies, developed triage guidelines, mapped out quarantine plans, prepared educational material, etc. The plan will be reviewed and revised on a regular basis and as world events unfold.

What's the difference between vaccines and antivirals?

Vaccines are the primary means to prevent illness and death from influenza. They stimulate the body to produce antibodies to fight off a virus.

Antivirals work by reducing the ability of a virus to reproduce; they do not provide immunity. If taken within 48 hours of getting sick, they can reduce influenza symptoms, shorten the length of illness and potentially reduce the serious complications of flu.

If a pandemic strikes, when will a vaccine be available?

The virus that causes the next pandemic will be so different than all those before it that people will have little immunity against it and no vaccine will exist to slow its spread. It will many months to identify the new strain, analyze it, develop a vaccine and produce enough to immunize the general world population.

Who gets the first vaccine shots?

The federal government has prepared a priority list of recipients based on occupations. Health care workers are listed as first priority, followed by essential service providers such as police, utility workers, persons employed in the transportation of essential goods, etc. The priority list would be reviewed and adjusted as a pandemic progresses.

I've heard that during a pandemic I will be asked to do work that isn't in my job description. Is that true?

Yes. If the pandemic is severe, 1/2 of Michener's staff could be absent because of illness. This means healthy employees will be asked to fill in and do the work of missing employees wherever it's safe and practical. There is no other way to keep the facility running.

Where can I get more information?

We recommend three websites as reliable sources of information about influenza and influenza pandemics: Health Canada (www.hc-sc.gc.ca), Alberta Health and Wellness (www.health.gov.ab.ca) and the World Health Organization (www.who.int/en). Look on the Michener website to see our Pandemic Preparedness Plan or download a condensed version called *Pandemic Response*.



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