

Pandemic Flu: Key Things You Should Know

- A pandemic is a global disease outbreak. An influenza pandemic occurs when a new influenza A virus emerges for which there is little or no immunity in the human population. The virus then begins to cause serious illness and spreads easily person-to-person worldwide.
- Avian influenza - commonly called "bird flu" - is an infection caused by influenza viruses that occur naturally in birds.
- One strain of avian influenza, the H5N1 virus, is endemic in much of Asia and has recently spread into Europe. Avian H5N1 infections have recently killed poultry and other birds in a number of countries.
- The risk from avian influenza is generally low to most people, because the viruses do not usually infect humans. H5N1 is one of the few avian influenza viruses to have crossed the species barrier to infect humans, and is highly fatal in humans and animals.
- So far, the spread of the H5N1 virus from person to person has been limited and has not continued beyond one person. Nonetheless, because all influenza viruses have the ability to change, scientists are concerned that H5N1 virus could one day be able to infect humans and spread easily from one person to another.
- Because these viruses do not commonly infect humans, there is little or no immune protection against them in the human population. If the H5N1 virus were to gain the capacity to spread easily from person to person, a pandemic (worldwide outbreak of disease) could begin. No one can predict when a pandemic might occur.
- A pandemic may come and go in waves, each of which can last for six to eight weeks.
- An especially severe influenza pandemic could lead to high levels of illness, death, social disruption, and economic loss.
- The United States has been working closely with other countries and the World Health Organization (WHO) to strengthen systems to detect outbreaks of influenza that might cause a pandemic. The effects of a pandemic can be managed if preparations are made in advance.

Source: pandemicflu.gov