

Information for the Community on Influenza

The illness

What is Influenza?

Influenza, commonly called 'the flu', is an infection of the nose, throat and lungs caused by the influenza virus.

What is pandemic influenza?

Pandemic influenza involves significant genetic variation in the influenza virus resulting in a new virus subtype. When this occurs, most people will be susceptible to the new subtype. Factors that influence the likelihood of a pandemic influenza include: the emergence of a new viral subtype; the capacity for the virus to spread efficiently from person to person; and being virulent enough to cause the disease.

What is avian influenza (bird flu) and is it going to cause a flu pandemic?

Avian influenza is an infectious disease of birds caused by specific type A strains of the influenza virus. There have been a number of outbreaks in Asia recently. There have also been some cases of people catching avian influenza as a result of close contact with sick poultry (chickens).

To date, it has not spread easily between humans. Influenza viruses evolve rapidly and there is a risk that the virus could undergo genetic changes making it able to spread easily from person to person. If these changes occur, then it could cause a pandemic.

Is avian influenza or pandemic influenza in Australia?

No. There are no current reports of avian influenza in animals or humans in Australia. A pandemic virus has not emerged yet, so is not present anywhere in the world.

What is the current level of threat of a pandemic in the world?

The avian influenza outbreaks overseas are being closely monitored by authorities. Although there have been human avian influenza cases overseas, the infection is still limited and doesn't appear to be readily passing from human to human.

For a pandemic to occur, there needs to be a new strain of influenza. This can happen in one of two ways — when an animal influenza virus alters its genetic structure to enable it to infect humans and spread from person-to-person, or, when a current human influenza strain undergoes a mutation; neither of these has happened to date.

How does it spread?

Influenza is very infectious. It can spread from person-to-person by respiratory secretions in three ways:

- Through spread of droplets from person to another (for example coughing, sneezing)
- By touching things that are contaminated by respiratory secretions and then touching your mouth, eye or nose
- Through spread of particles in the air in crowded populations in enclosed spaces

If I were exposed to influenza, how long would it take for me to get sick?

The incubation period varies from 1–7 days. Maximum infectiousness usually occurs from one day before onset of symptoms to three days after.

Most symptoms resolve within 2–7 days, although the cough may persist longer.

If I have influenza, how long will I be infectious for?

The infectious period is usually from the onset of illness to seven days after the resolution of fever. In children aged 12 years or less the infectious period is longer — a maximum of 21 days after the onset of illness. A small proportion of patients may be infectious from just before symptoms appear.

What are the symptoms?

The symptoms of pandemic flu are the same as the seasonal flu and include fever, headache, tiredness, dry cough, sore throat, runny or stuffy nose and muscle aches. Children can have additional gastro-intestinal symptoms, such as nausea, vomiting, and diarrhoea, but these symptoms are uncommon in adults.

Who is at risk from pandemic flu?

If a pandemic flu virus emerges, it will be a new one that the entire population has no immunity to. Therefore, potentially all age groups will be at risk, but it is difficult to predict in advance who will be most severely affected. Previous pandemics have affected different age groups and have had varying morbidity and mortality rates.

Can pandemic flu kill people?

Yes, however, there are treatments available and ways to prevent infection from occurring in the first place. Victoria has strategies in place to reduce the spread and impact of the pandemic in the population.

What are the complications?

Some of the complications caused by flu include bacterial pneumonia, dehydration, and worsening of chronic medical conditions, such as heart disease, asthma, or diabetes. Children may get sinus problems and ear infections as complications from the flu. Those aged 65 years and older and persons of any age with chronic medical conditions are at highest risk for serious complications of flu.

How is pandemic flu treated/prevented?

The treatment of influenza includes rest, ensuring adequate fluid intake and nutrition and taking medications to help with fever and pain such as aspirin (not in children) and paracetamol.

Antibiotics do not work against viruses, so they have no effect on influenza itself. Some people may need antibiotics because they have a secondary infection, such as pneumococcal pneumonia, as well as influenza. Those who are severely affected may need hospitalisation, supplemental oxygen therapy and respiratory support through artificial ventilation.

There are currently three antiviral drugs that can shorten the course of infection if given early in the disease (treatment) and provide short-term protection against influenza (prophylaxis): amantadine, rimantadine and zanamivir. All of these must be prescribed by a doctor.

The effectiveness of antivirals in the treatment of pandemic influenza are unclear. The Victorian Influenza Pandemic Plan provides for some limited use for the management of cases and contacts. However, in the event of a pandemic, these medications will be in short supply.

Prevention and control

Is there a vaccine that can prevent pandemic influenza?

The seasonal flu vaccine will not protect against pandemic flu. However in the lead up to a pandemic, it will still be important to vaccinate high risk groups against any seasonal strains of flu which are currently circulating. The pneumococcal vaccine is also important for the elderly, as it can prevent secondary bacterial pneumonia, caused by the pneumococcal bacteria. Your GP can give you further information about these vaccines and there is further information of the Victorian Government website (<http://www.health.vic.gov.au/immunisation/factsheets/pneumoflu.htm>).

The Australian Government has signed contracts with two vaccine manufacturers to ensure that enough pandemic vaccine will be produced during the event of a pandemic. However, the vaccine may take at least 3–6 months to produce, and initially will be in short supply. Therefore, priority groups are being determined

in conjunction with influenza experts. If sufficient pandemic vaccine is produced, all Australians may be able to receive the vaccine.

Do mass gathering (concerts, sports matches, use of public transport etcetera) have the capacity to spread influenza?

Yes, mass gatherings do have the capacity to spread influenza among participants and during a pandemic their cancellation may need to be considered at the time.

If you are feeling unwell stay home and if you are at a mass gathering avoid close contact with people who are sick (see messages below).

When can people who have just returned from a pandemic influenza affected areas return to school/work?

People who have travelled, holidayed or worked in pandemic influenza affected areas are able to return to school or work seven days after their departure, as the incubation period for influenza ranges from 1–7 days.

Is pandemic flu a quarantinable disease?

Yes, Highly pathogenic avian influenza affecting humans was made a quarantinable disease in March 2004.

If I get pandemic flu will I be put into quarantine?

Depending upon the severity of diseases, people who have symptoms of pandemic flu will be advised to stay at home or will be cared for in hospital (in isolation from other patients without pandemic flu). Depending on the timing and severity of the pandemic outbreaks, quarantining of contacts (that is family or friends) of pandemic influenza patients may occur, usually in the home. Quarantine or isolation measures may be used to help stop pandemic flu coming into Australia, as well as keeping it contained in the event the pandemic has arrived in this country.

How long will people be quarantined for?

Based on the current avian flu strains, individuals may be quarantined for 7–10 days. This will need to be reviewed according to the characteristics of the pandemic virus itself.

How can I best protect myself from catching Influenza?

- Avoid close contact
 - Avoid close contact with people who are sick.
- Stay home when you are sick
 - Do not go to work, school or shopping when you are sick.
 - Do not share eating or drinking utensils (for example cups, cutlery).
 - Don't get too close to uninfected friends and

relatives.

Cover your mouth and nose

- Cover your mouth and nose with a tissue when coughing or sneezing, dispose of the tissues afterwards and wash your hands after disposal of the tissues.

Wash your hands

- Wash your hands, especially before eating and touching your eyes, nose or mouth.

Contact a doctor as soon as possible if you have symptoms of influenza and any of the following:

- Aged 65 and over
- Pregnant
- Have a chronic condition such as:
 - Asthma, severe enough to need oral steroids, or to have been in hospital or to a hospital emergency department
 - Emphysema or chronic obstructive airways disease
 - Diabetes (unstable diabetes needing hospitalisation, or diabetes requiring insulin)
 - Heart failure
 - Organ transplant (kidney, liver, lung, heart)
- Travelled to countries affected within avian influenza within the last 7 days
- Have a rash.

When attending a medical practice, alert the receptionist to your symptoms so you can be seated away from others and possibly be given a surgical mask.

Look after yourself

- Get plenty of rest
- Drink plenty of fluids
- For aches and pains, use paracetamol regularly as per instructions
- Keep taking your usual medications (for example for high blood pressure, heart condition, asthma, diabetes), and follow the management plan for these conditions
- Avoid aspirin if you are aged 15 or younger, or if you take the drug Warfarin

See a doctor if, despite these instructions, you:

- Develop a rash, or
- Become drowsy, or
- Get worse (for example the cough gets worse), or
- Become short of breath, or
- Get sharp pains in your chest when you breathe in deeply.

Further information

The national information line — **1800 004 599** — is staffed for enquiries from the public from 8:30am to 5:00pm AEST Monday to Friday (recorded message at other times).

Information is also available on the web:

- Department of Human Services:
<http://www.health.vic.gov.au/avian/>
- Australian Government Department of Health and Ageing:
http://www.health.gov.au/avian_influenza/index.htm
- Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade:
<http://www.dfat.gov.au/>
- World Health Organization:
http://www.who.int/csr/disease/avian_influenza/en/
- Centres for Disease Control and Prevention (USA):
<http://www.cdc.gov/flu/>