

Pandemic Influenza: What you need to know

1. What is a pandemic?

A pandemic is a worldwide epidemic. When a disease spreads easily and rapidly through many countries and causes serious disease in a large percentage of the population it is called a pandemic.

2. How does a flu pandemic start?

Influenza (or flu) viruses constantly change. That's why a seasonal flu shot is only protective for one flu season and you need a new flu shot every year. A pandemic can start when a new strain of flu virus emerges that is different from the common strains. Because people have no immunity to the new virus, it can spread quickly. A new flu virus may result when an avian or bird flu virus mixes with human flu virus.

3. What is the contagious period?

Flu can be contagious for 24- 48 hours before any symptoms appear and for 7 days after the onset of symptoms. Children may be infectious for up to 10 days. You can spread the flu virus before you even know you're infected.

4. Will BC be affected?

Yes. A flu pandemic is likely to spread to all parts of the world, including BC.

The World Health Organization and public health experts around the world are watching closely for the emergence of pandemic flu virus so they can take steps to slow its progress.

5. What will happen if a flu pandemic hits BC?

The good news is that we have never been as well prepared for a flu pandemic as we are now. Here in Vancouver Coastal Health we are taking the steps to keep our health care system working in a pandemic. However, there will be many ill people and there will be a lot of pressure on our health services.

In a widespread pandemic, our daily routines may be disrupted. Some companies may close down operations and municipalities may decide to provide essential services only, because so many of their staff are away ill with flu. Public health officials may cancel public gatherings to avoid spread of the disease.

We won't know just how we'll be affected until we know more about the virus and what its effects are.

6. What is the difference between ordinary flu and pandemic flu?

Pandemic flu can appear similar to a seasonal (ordinary) flu. But, because people have little or no immunity to the pandemic flu, it can spread very rapidly.

The symptoms are the same: fever, headache, stuffy nose, aches, pains, sneezing, sore throat and cough. However the symptoms can be more severe with a pandemic flu and affect people who do not normally suffer as much from seasonal flu, such as young, healthy adults. Seasonal flu tends to affect the very young and the elderly more.

Both ordinary flu and pandemic flu are spread in the same way. When someone with the flu coughs or sneezes, droplets containing the virus can come into contact with the nose, eyes or mouth of another person. The virus can also be spread when people with the flu cough or sneeze into their hand and then touch objects such as door knobs. Other people can become infected if they touch the same object and then touch their face.

Ordinary flu	Pandemic flu
Ordinary flu (seasonal flu) happens every year.	Pandemic flu occurs only two or three times a century.
Seasonal flu occurs from November through April and then goes away.	Pandemic flu usually comes in two or three waves several months apart; each waves may last two to three months.
About 10% of people in BC get seasonal flu every year.	Depending on the severity of the pandemic, as many as 35% of people in BC may get flu over the course of pandemic.
Most people who get seasonal flu get sick but they recover within a couple of weeks.	About half the people who get pandemic flu may get sick. Most will recover, but it may take a long time. Some will die.
Seasonal flu is hardest on people with weakened immune systems: the very young, the elderly and people with certain chronic illnesses.	People of any age may become seriously ill with pandemic flu. It will depend on the virus. But people who don't have strong immune systems will still be at high risk.
Each year hundreds of people die of seasonal flu in BC.	During a flu pandemic there would be many more cases of flu and possibly more deaths.
You can protect yourself and those you care about from seasonal flu by getting your annual flu shot and making sure they do too.	Scientists will only be able to develop a vaccine against pandemic influenza once the virus has been identified. It will take four to five months to develop the vaccine, after a pandemic starts.
Pneumococcal vaccine protects against secondary infection, such as pneumonia, which is a major cause of serious illness and death among people with flu. Some high risk groups are eligible to receive pneumococcal vaccine at no charge. Contact your local public health office or your doctor to see if you qualify.	Pneumococcal vaccine protects against secondary infection, such as pneumonia, which is a major cause of serious illness and death among people with flu. Some high risk groups are eligible to receive pneumococcal vaccine at no charge. Contact your local public health office or your doctor to see if you qualify.
There are antiviral drugs that people can take to treat seasonal flu.	Antivirals may help people with pandemic flu but we won't know how effective they are until the virus is identified. We may not have a large enough supply for everyone who needs them.

7. Who is most at risk?

Everyone is at risk of getting pandemic flu. Pandemic flu will spread more quickly because very few people will have any immunity. Some groups, such as the very young or the elderly, may be at greater risk.

But, everyone will have to be careful. We won't know for sure who's at greatest risk until we know more about the virus.

8. How many people will fall ill? What kind of care will they need?

- We won't know how many will get ill until we know more about the virus.
- Of those who do get sick, roughly half will need to see a doctor and the other half will need information and advice on how to take care of themselves at home.
- Depending on the severity of symptoms, some people may need hospital care.

9. When will there be treatment for pandemic flu?

Antiviral drugs can treat flu but, in order for them to work, they have to be taken very soon after people get sick.

BC, like other provinces and the federal government, is stockpiling antivirals for use in a pandemic. However until we know more about the virus, we won't know if the antivirals will work. The number of people we will be able to treat will depend on the supply of drugs at the time.

10. When will there be a vaccine for pandemic flu?

Once the pandemic virus has been identified, vaccine manufacturers can begin production of the vaccine. It will take several months to produce a vaccine in sufficient quantity to immunize everyone. Our best defence against pandemic influenza is to be prepared.

11. How can I protect myself and my family from pandemic flu?

You can reduce your risk of getting pandemic flu by doing the same things you would do to protect yourself from seasonal flu:

- **Get your annual flu shot.** It will protect you from seasonal flu which could weaken your immune system and your resistance to pandemic flu.
- **Wash your hands with soap and water thoroughly and often** – good hand hygiene is the best way to prevent the spread of flu viruses.
- Keep alcohol-based hand sanitizers (gels or wipes) handy and use them often.
- **Cover your nose and mouth with a disposable tissue when you cough or sneeze** put the tissue in the garbage.
- **Stay home when you are sick.**
- Avoid large crowds where viruses can spread more easily.
- Reduce unnecessary travel.
- Follow any instructions from public health officials.

12. What is Vancouver Coastal Health doing to protect us from a pandemic?

We at Vancouver Coastal Health are working now to keep our health care system working during a pandemic.

We are:

- monitoring influenza in VCH and around the world.
- planning to make best use of health care resources and to support our health care providers
- developing distribution systems to get drugs, medical supplies and equipment to where they're needed, fast
- developing information for the public and health care providers
- making sure that we can deliver a vaccine to everyone in VCH, once it's developed
- developing communications systems so we can provide you with accurate, timely information to help you protect and care for yourself and those you care about.

If you want more information about flu, visit: www.vch.ca/flu.

For more information about VCH's pandemic preparedness, visit: www.vch.ca/pandemic.



(Adapted from "What you should know about a flu pandemic." Ontario Ministry of Health)