

## **Toronto's Pandemic Influenza Plan Frequently asked questions**

### **What is influenza?**

Influenza, the flu, is caused by a specific virus that typically comes around each fall or winter. People who get the flu usually have an abrupt onset of fever, headache, chills, muscle aches, physical exhaustion, cough, sore throat and runny or stuffy nose. Children may also feel sick to their stomach, vomit or have diarrhea.

### **What is Pandemic Influenza?**

An influenza pandemic occurs when there is an abrupt and major change in the protein structure of the Influenza A virus resulting, in a new strain. Because people have little or no immunity to this new strain, it can spread quickly, causing outbreaks in one or more countries or worldwide. This is called a pandemic.

### **How often do flu pandemics occur?**

Flu pandemics occur three or four times each century. There were three flu pandemics in the last century (1918, 1957 and 1968).

### **When will the next pandemic happen?**

No one knows for sure. It is generally accepted that another influenza pandemic will occur, but there is no way of predicting when that might be, nor the level of illness that may result.

### **Can a pandemic be prevented at an early stage?**

Efforts will be made internationally to control a pandemic at an early stage. However, flu is highly contagious and because whole populations will be susceptible to the new virus, it is not considered possible to halt the spread of a pandemic.

### **How will we know if a pandemic has started?**

The World Health Organization and certain countries have large surveillance programs to monitor and detect influenza activity around the world, including the emergence of potential pandemic strains. The WHO will declare the beginning of a pandemic. The Public Health Agency of Canada and the provincial Ministry of Health and Long term Care will declare the beginning of the pandemic period in Canada and Ontario, respectively.

### **How will we know the pandemic flu has reached Canada/Ontario/Toronto?**

Canada has developed an influenza surveillance system which is comprised of laboratory-based influenza virus identification, reporting of influenza-like illness by sentinel physicians across the country and reporting of influenza activity by provincial and territorial epidemiologists. Local and provincial public health jurisdictions may also undertake additional surveillance measures. This information will help identify pandemic influenza as early as possible.

### **How will the pandemic flu spread to Canada?**

Most likely this will occur when a person ill with the disease in an affected part of the world travels to Canada and develops symptoms here.

### **Will people be prevented from traveling?**

If a pandemic starts outside of Canada, people are likely to be advised not to travel to affected areas or attend international gatherings such as large conferences and sporting events. Depending on how the pandemic develops, it may be necessary to reduce the movement of people within Canada to delay spread of the disease.

**Who will be at risk during a flu pandemic?**

Everyone is potentially at risk of becoming ill during an influenza pandemic. Certain groups may be at greater risk than others but that will not be known until the pandemic virus emerges.

**How long will the pandemic last?**

Based on the last two pandemics, it is estimated that the next pandemic will arrive in Canada within three months of emerging in another part of the world. However it may arrive much sooner because of global air travel. The first peak of illness is expected to occur within two to four months of the virus arriving in Canada. In past pandemics, it has been observed the influenza spreads in two or more waves, either in the same year or successive influenza seasons. The second wave may occur within three to nine months of the initial outbreak. Each wave is likely to last from six to eight weeks.

**Will there be a vaccine for pandemic flu?**

It is estimated it will take approximately four to six months to produce a suitable vaccine. Initially, there will not be enough vaccine for everyone. The federal government has developed “priority groups” to determine the order in which people will receive the vaccine. Currently, the priority groups, listed in order of highest to lowest priority, are: health care workers; essential service workers; persons at high risk of serious illness; healthy adults; and healthy children.

Toronto Public Health will work with hospitals and other organizations to ensure priority groups receive vaccine. When enough vaccine becomes available, TPH will organize mass vaccination clinics for the general public. TPH will make public announcements about the time and location of these clinics.

**Why is a vaccine not being produced for the pandemic flu now?**

A pandemic influenza vaccine cannot be produced or stockpiled until the new strain has been identified.

**What are antiviral drugs?**

Antiviral drugs are used for the prevention or treatment of some viral infections. These drugs destroy a virus or interfere with its ability to grow and reproduce. When used for prevention, people must take the medication for as long as they are exposed to the virus. When used for treatment, infected people receive the drug to reduce symptoms, shorten the length of illness and minimize serious complications. Antiviral medications must be taken within 48 hours of the first symptoms of influenza to be effective.

**Which antiviral drug is the government stockpiling?**

The antiviral drug that is currently being stockpiled in Canada is called Oseltamivir (Tamiflu). Oseltamivir is available as a pill (or less commonly as a powder) which is swallowed. It is taken once per day for prevention or twice per day for treatment.

**What is Avian flu?**

Avian influenza or “bird flu” is a contagious disease of animals, caused by viruses that normally infect only birds and less commonly pigs. Although rare, there have been instances of limited human-to-human transmission of H5N1, the avian flu subtype that is currently circulating in Asia and parts of Europe. There is concern that the virus may change to a form that is highly infectious for humans and spread easily from person-to-person. Such a change could mark the start of a pandemic.