

PANDEMIC INFLUENZA

Important information for Nova Scotians

Key Facts

Pandemic flu and its impact on Nova Scotians

Pandemic Influenza

Key facts

1 The virus

- Pandemic influenza is a type of influenza that occurs every few decades and that spreads rapidly to affect most countries and regions around the world.
- Unlike the “ordinary” influenza that usually occurs every winter in Canada, pandemic influenza can occur at any time of year.
- There is a difference between a pandemic and an epidemic. A pandemic affects a higher number of people and a much larger geographic region,
- Pandemics of influenza have occurred occasionally for centuries—three times in the last hundred years—resulting in many thousands of deaths.
- Experts predict another pandemic, but cannot say exactly when it will happen. When it does, it may come in two or more waves several months apart. Each wave may last two to three months.
- Pandemic influenza is much more serious than ordinary influenza. As much as a quarter of the population may be affected—maybe more.
- Pandemic influenza is likely to cause the same symptoms as an ordinary influenza, but the symptoms may be more severe because nobody will have any immunity or protection against that particular virus.
- A serious pandemic is also likely to cause many deaths, disrupt the daily life of many people, and cause intense pressure on health and other services.
- Every pandemic is different. Until the virus starts circulating, it is impossible to predict its full effects.

2 What causes an influenza pandemic?

Pandemics of influenza are due to the emergence of a new influenza virus that is different from recently circulating strains and to which few—if any—people have any immunity. This allows it to spread widely, easily and to cause more serious illness.



3 Who's at risk?

Once an influenza pandemic starts, everybody will be at risk of getting pandemic influenza. Certain groups may be at greater risk than others. Until the virus starts circulating, we will not know for sure who they will be.

4 Is there a vaccine to protect against pandemic influenza?

No vaccine is ready to protect against pandemic influenza. The virus that causes pandemic influenza will be new. A vaccine to protect against it cannot be made until the virus has been identified. Before a pandemic starts it is difficult, if not impossible, to predict what strain will cause it. Even then, predictions may prove wrong, or the predicted virus may have changed enough for a pre-prepared vaccine to be ineffective. Ordinary influenza vaccines will not provide protection, and having had a flu shot in the recent past will not provide protection.

Medicines called antivirals can be used to treat pandemic influenza, but their effectiveness won't be known until the pandemic virus is circulating.

5 What is the government doing to prepare for an influenza pandemic?

- The government is taking steps to be in the best possible position for a vaccine to be manufactured as quickly as possible when a pandemic virus is identified. The development of a vaccine is still likely to take several months, however. The vaccine is unlikely to be ready at the start of a new pandemic.
- The provincial Department of Health is working with Health Canada to monitor avian influenza activity overseas and updates key staff in the district health authorities so that they are aware of any activity.
- We have a surveillance system in place in all of our hospitals to identify any severe respiratory illnesses, including things like avian influenza or SARS.
- The government is building up its stockpile of antiviral drugs. They will be used in the most effective way to treat those most at risk of serious illness based on how the disease develops. It will be most important to prevent influenza in groups of people necessary to provide health care and keep the province running.
- Nova Scotia's plan will be in line with the *Canadian Pandemic Influenza Plan*. It will map out how the province will prepare for and respond to pandemic influenza. The province continues to work on the plan based



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on new information that becomes available. The plan will include actions to improve our preparedness now, before another pandemic occurs.

- If pandemic influenza reaches Canada, there will be announcements in the newspapers and on radio and TV, and advice will be given on the best course of action to take. Simple hygiene measures and reducing social contact could help to slow spread of the disease and buy time until a vaccine is ready.

6 What can I do?

You can reduce, but not eliminate, the risk of getting or spreading influenza during a pandemic with these steps:

- Maintain good basic hygiene. For example, wash your hands often to prevent spreading the virus from your hands to your face.
- Cover your nose and mouth with a tissue or shirtsleeve when coughing and sneezing.
- Avoid crowds whenever possible.

If you do catch the influenza

- Stay at home and rest.
- Take medicines to relieve the symptoms (following the instructions included with the medicines).
- Drink plenty of fluids.

This is both for your own health and to avoid spreading the illness to others.

More information will be given at the time of a pandemic through leaflets, websites, and the media. Such information will tell you how you can protect yourself and your family and what to do if you think you are infected. Some people will be recommended further treatment—further information will be given at the time.

If you would like more information, visit:

www.gov.ns.ca/pandemic

www.phac-aspc.gc.ca