

FACT SHEET

Pandemic influenza

What is influenza?

Influenza is an infection of the lungs and airways caused by a virus. It can cause severe health problems for children less than two years old, seniors, people with certain chronic illnesses (such as heart or lung disease), and people with weakened immune systems.

Every year, various strains of influenza virus circulate throughout the world. The virus that causes influenza often changes slightly. Most people who have had influenza will have some protection against the changed virus. Pandemic influenza is radically different.

What is pandemic influenza?

Of the three influenza virus types (A, B and C), only Type A causes pandemics. It also infects birds and mammals, including pigs and horses. Three to four times each century the influenza Type A virus forms a completely new strain. Everyone is at risk of infection with the new strain. Current vaccines will not offer protection.

If this new virus spreads easily from person to person, it could quickly travel around the world and cause serious illness and death for millions of people. This global epidemic is called an influenza pandemic. A pandemic differs from the influenza we see every year in that larger numbers of people catch it, the illness is more severe, and more people die.

Experts predict an influenza pandemic will happen within the next five to 10 years.

Why do scientists expect another pandemic?

In the 20th century, there were three pandemics:

- 1918/1919 Spanish Influenza
- 1957/1958 Asian Influenza
- 1968/1969 Hong Kong Influenza

The 1918 pandemic was the most serious, causing over 20 million deaths worldwide. In Alberta, there were 38,000 cases and 4,000 deaths out of a population of about 579,000. In Canada, 30,000-50,000 people died - only slightly less than during World War I.

The average time between each of the last four pandemics has been 25 years. However, the range has varied between 11 and 39 years. It has been more than 35 years since the last pandemic.

What would the effect of a pandemic be in Alberta?

Experts believe a pandemic influenza virus could reach Canada within three months after showing up anywhere in the world. It would have its greatest effect on Canadians within five to seven months.

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PANDEMIC INFLUENZA

The effect in Alberta could be broad and severe. Compared to a non-pandemic year, there could be:

- four to seven times as many outpatient visits due to influenza.
- four to seven times as many hospitalizations due to influenza.
- eight to 20 times as many deaths due to influenza.
- a shortage of hospital beds.

Public services such as schools could be affected. Employee absences could make it difficult for private businesses to operate.

What can we do to prevent a pandemic?

With current scientific knowledge there is no way to prevent a pandemic. However, there are ways to lessen the effect of a pandemic - to decrease the number of deaths and control the effect on Alberta's health-care system. It is especially important to quickly develop and produce a vaccine.

A global network, coordinated by the World Health Organization – WHO, is watching for new influenza strains. When the pandemic strain appears, this surveillance network will provide Canada with an early warning so we can start producing vaccine as quickly as possible.

What are governments doing to prepare for a pandemic?

Federal, provincial, territorial and regional governments are working on contingency plans for a pandemic. These comprehensive plans include everything from vaccine production and distribution to keeping the public up-to-date on the pandemic.

What should you do during a pandemic?

During a pandemic, health professionals will be extremely busy taking care of the ill and providing vaccine, when it becomes available.

There are things you can do to take care of yourself and your family.

- Wash your hands - this is one of the best defences against influenza.
- Rest.
- Drink plenty of fluids.
- Take acetaminophen or ibuprofen for fever and pain.
- Minimize contact with others, especially seniors, children and people with chronic disease or weakened immune systems.
- **Keep informed.**

In a pandemic, Alberta Health and Wellness and your regional health authority will advise you about vaccine availability and any changes that may be made in health-care services to deal with the pandemic. Volunteers may be needed as contingency plans unfold. Your help will be appreciated.

For more information contact:

Health Link Alberta

Edmonton, call 408-LINK (5465)

Calgary, call 943-LINK (5465)

Outside Edmonton and Calgary local calling areas, call toll-free 1-866-408-LINK (5465)

visit: www.healthlinkalberta.ca

Public Health Centres

(Monday - Friday, daytime hours), or
physicians or pharmacists

Alberta Health and Wellness

visit: www.health.gov.ab.ca

(Contact information)