

What is Pandemic Influenza?

What is influenza?

Influenza, or the "flu," is a common respiratory disease caused by a virus. Every year, the flu virus causes outbreaks in fall and winter. This is because each year, the flu virus changes a little so the protection, or immunity, our bodies have built up against previous viruses is not as effective.

The flu spreads easily from person to person through coughing and sneezing and hands touching your eyes, mouth or nose. Flu symptoms can appear suddenly and include a fever, cough, fatigue, headache, muscle pain, a runny nose and a sore throat. The worst symptoms usually last about five days, but coughing can last up to two to three weeks. Sometimes children with the flu can have nausea, vomiting or diarrhea.

Although colds and other viruses may cause similar symptoms, influenza weakens a person more than other viruses. About 20 per cent of persons infected will not have any symptoms. In others, symptoms can be mild to severe. However, if infected, very young children, people with some chronic medical conditions and the elderly are more likely than healthy older children or adults to get very sick, and may need to be hospitalized. In Canada up to 7000 people die each year from influenza or its complications. People over 65 years are at the greatest risk of dying from the flu.

How is pandemic flu different?

Flu pandemics happen when a new kind of influenza virus, that is able to spread easily from person to person appears, and spreads quickly around the world. Since people have no protection against the new virus, it will likely cause more illnesses and a larger number of deaths than the seasonal flu.

Influenza pandemics have happened every ten to forty years for at least the last 500 years. There were three flu pandemics last century, the last in 1968. The most severe – often called the “Spanish Flu” pandemic – was in 1918. No one can predict exactly when a pandemic will happen, but it may be soon. That is why people and communities must prepare now, to ensure they are ready to respond when needed.

How will BC know that a flu pandemic is coming?

A flu pandemic will likely begin outside North America. A worldwide network of scientists, including scientists in Canada and BC, closely tracks flu activity. This cooperation will help to identify a new flu virus that could cause a pandemic, as early as possible.

What will happen in BC?

Based on past pandemics, it will take no longer than six months from the start of a flu pandemic somewhere in the world until the time that same flu causes outbreaks in BC. Because airline travel is much more common now than ever before, this timeline could be much shorter.

BC has had an alert system in place for a long time, and it has been very effective in the past for identifying illnesses, such as Severe Acute Respiratory Syndrome (SARS). It includes asking health care workers across the province to report any new or unusual illness in travelers either coming or returning to BC. This system will ensure early testing and provide early warning to health officials when the virus that causes pandemic flu has reached BC. When a virus that can cause a flu pandemic has been found in BC, the Provincial Health Officer will inform the public.

The BC Pandemic Influenza Preparedness Plan lays out steps and ways that BC can prepare for a flu pandemic before it arrives, and respond to the pandemic once it is here. The Plan’s key goals are to help communities and their resources to work together to reduce sickness and death, and give families and groups tips and ways to stay well and secure. Check with your local health authority for more information.

Unlike other natural disasters like tsunamis, floods or earthquakes, once a flu pandemic arrives, it could last for several months. It is most likely that a pandemic will strike hardest during the usual flu season, which is December to March. It is also likely that a pandemic will occur in several waves, with the second wave of illness occurring within six to nine months after the first. This means people need to be prepared to respond not only once, but several times.

When a flu pandemic reaches BC, it may make people sick in different parts of the province at different times. More people might get sick in one city than in another.

There is no way to know for sure how many people will get sick or die in the next pandemic.

What can you expect where you live?

During a flu pandemic, more people will be sick at the same time than normal, and it will be harder for the health system to keep up. Based on United Kingdom models of illness rates during a pandemic, it is estimated that at its peak, 10 per cent of persons or more will be ill enough to be off work during any one week. Because more people will be sick, you might have to wait longer to see your doctor or get into a hospital. Because more people will be off work with the flu, there may be problems in other types of services, like garbage pick-up, bus service, and being able to buy food.

There are plans in place to help people during a pandemic. For example, you can expect that:

- The most needed medical services will still be provided;
- Special clinics may be set up specifically to treat people with flu or flu-like illness; and
- People with the worst symptoms and those who are most likely to get very sick or die from the flu will be cared for.

How can you prepare?

Even though a flu pandemic cannot be prevented, the more you know and plan about a pandemic beforehand, the better you be able to deal with a pandemic if it occurs.

The BC Ministry of Health, the BC Centre for Disease Control, and the regional health authorities are preparing now for a flu pandemic. They are working to make sure that medical professionals, essential service workers and the public are aware of the BC Pandemic Influenza Preparedness Plan. They are working to ensure that medical care, treatments and other social supports can be available as much as possible, as early as possible, before, during and after a pandemic.

Everyone has a role to play in preparing for a pandemic. You can start by:

- Learning as much as you can by reading information that is on government Web sites, watching the news, and reading the newspaper.
- Making sure you get a flu shot every year. This will help protect you from the winter flu season, but it will not protect you during a pandemic. What it will do is help develop the capacity of the vaccine maker and help them prepare for production of a pandemic vaccine.
- If you are over 65 years and have a chronic health concern, ask your doctor about the pneumococcal vaccine, which can help protect against the most common complication of the flu - pneumonia.
- Learning how you can keep yourself and your family from getting sick if a flu pandemic comes to BC.

This means practicing basic hygiene techniques now, such as regular hand washing and covering your mouth with a tissue when sneezing and coughing.

- Learning how you can take care of yourself and your family if you or they become sick.
- Knowing who to call if you need medical help or health advice during a pandemic. This could be your family doctor, your local public health unit, the BC NurseLine, or others who provide you with medical care. During a pandemic, it may mean going to special flu clinics.
- Talking to your employer and your local municipality and health authority about their pandemic preparedness plans.

Advance planning by all organizations and citizens, including you, will help reduce the number of people who get sick, or die, and the amount of social disruption caused during a pandemic.

For more information

For more information on pandemic influenza, see the following BC HealthFiles:

[#94b Staying Healthy During an Influenza Pandemic](#)

[#94c Self Care During an Influenza Pandemic](#)

For more information on BC pandemic influenza preparedness, see the following Web sites:

www.health.gov.bc.ca/pandemic/index.html

www.bccdc.org/content.php?item=150

www.bchealthguide.org/bcauthorities.stm



BC Centre for Disease Control
AN AGENCY OF THE PROVINCIAL HEALTH SERVICES AUTHORITY

For more BC HealthFile topics visit
www.bchealthguide.org/healthfiles/index.stm,
or visit your local public health unit.

Call the BC NurseLine to speak to a registered nurse, available 24-hours every day:

- In Greater Vancouver, call 604-215-4700
- In BC, call toll-free 1-866-215-4700
- Deaf and hearing-impaired, call 1-866-889-4700
- Pharmacist available 5pm to 9am every day
- Translation services in over 130 languages upon request.

Visit BC HealthGuide OnLine – a world of health information you can trust at
www.bchealthguide.org