

PANDEMIC FLU – What is it

Pandemic flu is a type of influenza that occurs every few decades and which spreads rapidly to affect most countries and regions around the world. The symptoms of pandemic flu are similar to those of 'ordinary' flu but are usually more severe.

Flu viruses are constantly changing, producing new strains. Pandemics occur when a virus develops that is so different from previously circulating strains that few, if any people have any immunity to it. This allows it to spread widely and rapidly, affecting many hundreds of thousands of people.

Pandemic flu is currently being predicted by experts at the World Health Organisation [there were 3 pandemics last century]. However they cannot say when that will be. The World Health Organisation is on constant lookout for the first signs of a pandemic emerging so steps can be taken to slow its spread or contain it. If a pandemic flu strain emerges overseas, it will almost certainly reach the UK. Once it arrives, it is likely to spread throughout the country in a matter of weeks. It may occur in two waves several months apart, with each wave lasting about 2 to 3 months.

Pandemic flu occurs sporadically at any time of the year and may affect around 25% of the population. Therefore it could be a more serious infection for everyone and people of every age may be at risk of serious illness. A vaccine will not be available to start with – when it does become available the aim will be to immunise the whole population as rapidly as vaccine supplies come through. Once spread there will be high levels of flu, intense pressure on health services, disruption to daily life and possible many deaths.

Medicines called antivirals can be used to treat pandemic flu but their effectiveness won't be known until the pandemic virus is circulating. There is no vaccine ready to protect against pandemic flu, as it cannot be made until the new virus has been identified. The vaccine against 'ordinary' flu will not protect against pandemic flu.

The government has prepared a UK-wide Influenza Pandemic Contingency Plan which will be put into action in the event of a pandemic. If pandemic flu reaches the UK, there will be announcements in newspapers, and on radio and TV, and advice will be given on the best course of action to take. This will include simple hygiene measures and treatment advice.

For further information:

- Visit www.nhsdirect.nhs.uk
- Go to NHS Direct Interactive on digital satellite TV by pressing the interactive button on the remote control
- Call NHS Direct on 0845 4647 (calls charged at local rate)
- Visit www.dh.gov.uk/pandemicflu and www.immunisation.nhs.uk
- Pick up leaflet Pandemic Flu from your doctor's surgery or clinic