

Independent Guide

What is Pandemic Flu?



Independent workplace compliance

Introduction

Pandemic (from the Greek for pan, "all" and demos 'crowd') is the spread of a new infectious disease across large regions of or the whole World, which affects many people. They are distinct from epidemics, for example such as seasonal flu, insofar as these tend to affect people within specific populations **or** regions at the same time and their spread is not as wide as a pandemic.

A pandemic occurs when, typically a bacteria or virus, which people have little or no immunity to, emerges and starts spreading between populations. They have occurred throughout history, on average three times per century, resulting in many deaths.

When considering influenza (flu), unlike "ordinary" flu, which occurs every year, affects up to 10% of the population and poses most risk to the young, old or already ill, "Pandemic flu" may occur at any time, affects 25% or more of the population and every age group can at risk of serious illness.

What causes pandemic flu?

Pandemic flu arises when a new flu virus, one which is markedly different from any recently circulating strain, appears and spreads rapidly and widely across the globe. Because the virus is new, there is no inherited or herd immunity to it and so it can spread and infect people more easily. Viruses such as influenza, because they are very infectious, can mutate and are liable to jump between species (e.g. animals to humans) make them likely candidates to cause pandemics.

Pandemic phases

There are currently six phase descriptions used by the World Health Organisation (WHO) for pandemics. Phases 1-3 correlate to preparedness and planning and 4-6 signal the need for response and mitigation. The phases in more detail are:

Phase 1 – no viruses circulating in the animal population are causing human infection.

Phase 2 – an animal influenza circulating among domestic or wild animals is known to have caused infection in humans.

Phase 3 – an animal or human-animal influenza has caused sporadic cases or clusters in people and limit human-to-human transmission.

Phase 4 – verified human to human transmission and "community level outbreaks"

Phase 5 – human to human spread in at least two countries in one of the WHO regions. On reaching Phase 5 a pandemic is often imminent

Phase 6 – Phase 5 requirements met, and community level outbreaks occur in at least one other country in a different WHO region

The WHO also describe a "post-peak period" where "pandemic disease levels in most countries with adequate surveillance will have dropped below peak observed levels. The post-peak period signifies that pandemic activity appears to be decreasing; however, it is uncertain if additional waves will occur and countries will need to be prepared for a second wave."

Is there a vaccine to protect against pandemic flu?

Until a pandemic flu arrives, a vaccine to protect against it cannot be made, as it is a new virus it therefore needs the production of a new vaccine to give protection. Ordinary seasonal flu vaccines will not protect against pandemic flu.

As we have seen with COVID-19, which while not a flu has similar characteristics, today's technology can produce targeted vaccines, even to new biological agents, very quickly.

Are there drugs available for treatment?

There are known drugs available, which can reduce the severity and duration of the illness. The UK government usually has a stock of these anti-viral drugs against the contingency of a flu pandemic.



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How can I protect my family and myself if a flu pandemic arrives in the UK?

These viruses are spread through the air when people cough or sneeze, so there are some basic measures, which you can take to reduce the risk of infection. Facemasks will have little place in preventing the spread of the virus, but you can reduce the likelihood of spreading the virus by adhering to the following:

- When you sneeze or cough make sure that, whenever possible, you cover both your nose and mouth with a good quality tissue, and make sure that this tissue is promptly and carefully placed in a bag before binning;
- Wherever possible, avoid non-essential travel and contact with large crowds;
- Maintain good basic hygiene, for example washing your hands frequently with soap and water to reduce the spread of the virus from your hands to your face, surfaces or other people (this means lathering the hands with soap for at least 20 seconds before rinsing off);
- Make sure that hard surfaces which people touch which may be contaminated, such as door handles, lift buttons, taps, etc. are frequently and properly cleaned, using normal cleaning products and disinfectant; and
- Make sure that your children also follow the above advice.

If you do catch flu, the symptoms of which include the sudden onset of high temperature, muscle aches and pains, tiredness, cough, sore throat and stuffy or running nose, then do the following:

- Stay at home and rest;
- Take medicines such as aspirin, ibuprofen or paracetamol to relieve the symptoms following the instructions with the medicines, (please note that children under 16 must not be given aspirin or ready-made flu remedies containing aspirin); and
- Drink plenty of fluids.

In the event of pandemic flu arriving in the UK look for advice from government departments and the NHS through their media campaigns and websites. The World Health Organisation has a system in place to watch for pandemic flu and the UK government has an influenza pandemic contingency plan, which would be put into action if required.

For further information on Pandemic Flu see:

<https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/pandemic-flu-checklist-for-businesses>
<http://www.hse.gov.uk/biosafety/diseases/pandflu.htm>

This guide is of a general nature; specific advice can be obtained from Assurity Consulting. Assurity Consulting is the UK's leading independent compliance consultancy specialising in workplace health, safety and environmental solutions. We have over 30 years' experience of helping customers of all sizes, from across all sectors, manage their compliance responsibilities, making sure that their organisation is compliant, their employees are safe, their processes are cost effective and their management team is in control.



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