



## ADAMS COUNTY HEALTH DEPARTMENT

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### **Pandemic Influenza and Avian (Bird) Flu – December, 2005**

#### **What is pandemic influenza?**

An influenza pandemic is a global outbreak of disease that occurs when a new influenza virus appears in the human population, causes serious illness, and then spreads easily from person to person worldwide.

Most people will not have any natural immunity to a new virus. A pandemic flu would likely spread rapidly through international travel.

#### **How is a pandemic different from regular flu season?**

A flu pandemic has little or nothing in common with the annual flu season. A pandemic flu would be a new strain and much more serious and contagious flu virus. Humans would have no natural resistance to a new strain of influenza. Also, there is a vaccine for *seasonal* flu, but there is no vaccine available at this time for a pandemic flu.

#### **Why is pandemic influenza so serious?**

If a new, highly contagious strain of influenza begins to infect humans, it would likely cause widespread illness and death within a matter of months, and could last up to two years. The Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) predict that as much as 25% to 30% of the US population could be sick, hospitalized, and many may die as a result of severe illness.

#### **Can pandemic flu be prevented?**

Governments all around the world are preparing for the possibility of a pandemic outbreak. Even so, it would not be possible to prevent or stop a pandemic once it begins to spread easily person-to-person. A person infected with influenza can be contagious for 24 hours before symptoms may appear, and for seven days thereafter, making it extremely easy for the virus to infect large numbers of people.

Although the federal government is stockpiling large quantities of medical supplies and anti-viral drugs, no country in the world has enough anti-virals to protect their citizens. Anti-virals would be used to treat severe cases as long as there was a reasonable chance that the drugs might help save lives. Anti-virals might also be reserved for people who work in areas of high risk for exposure in an outbreak, such as health care workers.

Other strategies for slowing the spread of a potentially deadly pandemic influenza virus could include temporarily closing schools, sports arenas, theaters, restaurants, taverns, and other public gathering places and facilities.

There currently is no vaccine to protect humans against a pandemic influenza virus, however, vaccine development efforts are under way to protect humans against the current bird flu virus in Southeast Asia.

## **When is pandemic influenza expected?**

It's impossible to say if, when, and how a pandemic might develop.

## **Why does the current bird flu outbreak in Southeast Asia pose a risk of causing a pandemic influenza A outbreak in humans?**

The danger is that the bird flu virus may mutate into a new form of human flu that would be easily spread.

The current bird flu outbreak is caused by one type of influenza virus scientists call "H5N1." The H5N1 outbreak among domestic chickens and ducks in eight Southeast Asian countries is widespread and uncontrolled--and has directly infected a small number of humans. People who have contact with infected birds or surfaces that have been contaminated with droppings from infected birds are at risk of becoming infected themselves.

More than 200 million birds in the affected Southeast Asian countries have either died from the disease or were killed in order to try to control the outbreak. Many countries are currently dealing with bird flu outbreaks--Cambodia, China, Indonesia, Japan, Laos, South Korea, Thailand, and Vietnam, and countries in Eastern Europe. Australia has also announced that it is investigating a possible outbreak of H5N1.

So far, there has been no sustained person-to-person spread of the disease. However, a few isolated cases of human-to-human spread between family members are currently under investigation.

## **What are the symptoms of bird flu in humans?**

The reported symptoms of bird flu in humans have ranged from typical influenza-like symptoms (e.g., fever, cough, sore throat, and muscle aches) to eye infections (conjunctivitis), pneumonia, acute respiratory distress, viral pneumonia, and other severe and life-threatening complications.

## **What can the public do to reduce their risk of pandemic influenza?**

There are several things you can do to reduce your risk of influenza:

- Make a personal preparedness plan and kit: visit <http://www.redcross.org>
- Stop germs from spreading.
  - Cover your mouth and nose with tissue when coughing and sneezing
  - Wash your hands often
  - Stay home when you are sick
- Stay informed. These web sites provide regularly updated information about bird flu and pandemic flu:
  - <http://www.pandemicflu.gov>
  - <http://www.cdc.gov/flu/avian/gen-info/pandemics.htm>
  - World Health Organization: <http://www.who.int/en/>
- If you plan to travel to Southeast Asia, check the CDC web site for travel advisories at <http://www.cdc.gov/travel/>