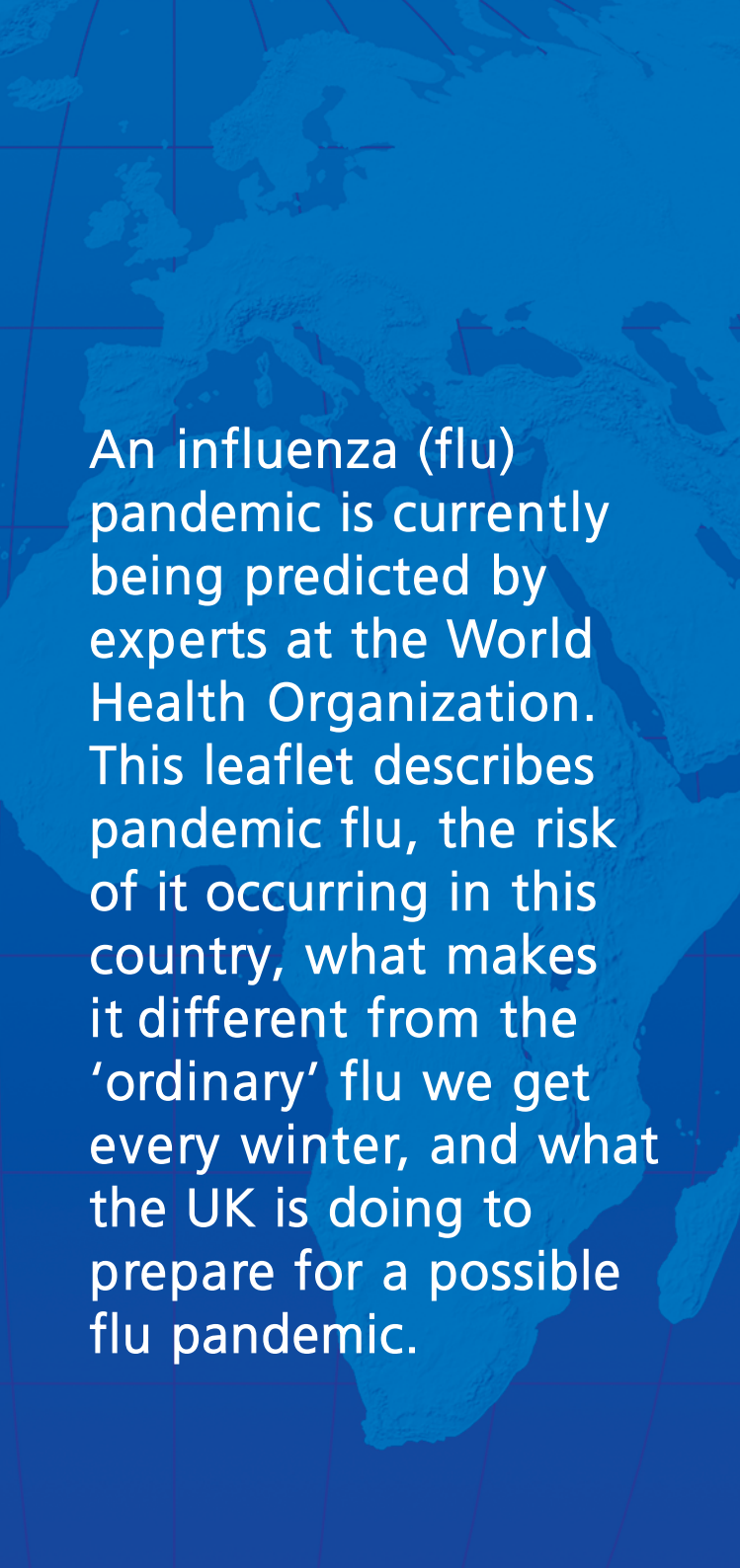


# PANDEMIC FLU

Important information  
for you and your family





An influenza (flu) pandemic is currently being predicted by experts at the World Health Organization. This leaflet describes pandemic flu, the risk of it occurring in this country, what makes it different from the 'ordinary' flu we get every winter, and what the UK is doing to prepare for a possible flu pandemic.

## WHAT IS PANDEMIC FLU?

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.

Some of the differences between pandemic and 'ordinary' flu are listed in the table on the following pages.

## HOW DOES A FLU PANDEMIC START?

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.

A new pandemic virus may emerge through the mixing of a human flu virus with an animal flu virus (usually a bird (avian) flu virus).

What is the difference between

## 'ORDINARY' FLU

Occurs every year during the winter

Affects up to about 10% of the population

For most people it is an unpleasant but not life-threatening infection

The very young, the very old and people with certain chronic illnesses are most at risk of serious illness

Annual vaccination is available for those at risk of serious illness

Antiviral drugs are available to treat those at special risk

# 'ordinary' flu and pandemic flu?

## PANDEMIC FLU

There were three pandemics last century. Occurs sporadically at any time of the year

May affect around 25% of the population

It could be a more serious infection for everyone

People of every age may be at risk of serious illness

A vaccine won't 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

Antiviral drugs are being stockpiled and will be used in the most effective way, according to how the disease develops

## HOW LIKELY IS A FLU PANDEMIC?

Three pandemics occurred in the last century (see opposite page). Scientists predict that another pandemic will happen, possibly soon, although they cannot say when that will be.

## HOW LIKELY IS IT THAT PANDEMIC FLU WILL SPREAD TO THE UK?

The World Health Organization 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.

# PANDEMICS DURING THE LAST CENTURY

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## 'Spanish Flu'

Year: 1918-1919

Estimated deaths: 20-40 million (global),  
250,000 (UK)

Age group most affected: Healthy  
young adults (20-50 years)

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## 'Asian Flu'

Year: 1957-1958

Estimated deaths: 1 million (global),  
33,000 (UK)

Age group most affected: Very young  
and very old

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## 'Hong Kong Flu'

Year: 1968-1969

Estimated deaths: 1-4 million (global),  
30,000 (England and Wales)

Age group most affected: Very old  
and those with underlying medical  
conditions

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## HOW WILL A FLU PANDEMIC DIFFER FROM AN OUTBREAK OF 'ORDINARY' FLU?

It is difficult to say just how serious a pandemic will be. It depends on how easily the particular virus spreads, which age groups are affected most, the severity of the symptoms it produces, and how many deaths it causes.

A flu pandemic may occur in two waves several months apart, with each wave lasting about two to three months.

It is likely that pandemic flu will affect far more people than 'ordinary' flu. Around a quarter of the population may be affected by the end of the pandemic.

The vaccine against 'ordinary' flu will not protect against pandemic flu.

But 'ordinary' flu can be serious so it is very important that everyone who is due an 'ordinary' flu jab has one.



## WHAT WILL THIS MEAN FOR THE UK?

Once in the UK, a flu pandemic will spread across the country in a matter of weeks and may cause:

- high levels of influenza
- intense pressure on health services
- disruption to many aspects of daily life
- many deaths.

The UK government has drawn up an Influenza Pandemic Contingency Plan (see [www.dh.gov.uk/pandemicflu](http://www.dh.gov.uk/pandemicflu)).

This recognises the exceptional demands that are likely to be placed on the National Health Service.

## HOW LIKELY AM I TO CATCH PANDEMIC FLU?

You are more likely to catch it than 'ordinary' flu because it will spread rapidly and very few people will have any immunity to it.

Everyone will be at risk. Some groups of people may be more at risk than others, but every pandemic is different. Until the virus starts spreading it is very difficult to predict who these groups might be.



With 'ordinary' flu those groups of people more likely to become seriously ill include:

- the very young
- people aged 65 and over
- people with existing medical conditions such as lung diseases, diabetes, cancer, kidney or heart problems
- people who are immunosuppressed because of certain treatments, or illnesses such as HIV/AIDS.

These may be different in a pandemic.



## WON'T THERE BE A VACCINE TO PREVENT PANDEMIC FLU?

Vaccines have to be made specifically for the particular flu virus causing an epidemic or pandemic. The vaccines take several months to produce. Steps will be taken to produce a vaccine to protect against a new pandemic strain of flu as quickly as possible, but a vaccine is unlikely to be available for the first wave of illness.

Depending on the timing of the second wave of a flu pandemic, scientists may be able to develop a

## Antivirals

Antiviral drugs can be used to treat pandemic flu but their use has several limitations.

- To be effective, they have to be given within 48 hours of the symptoms starting.
- Treatment with antivirals should help reduce the symptoms of flu and the length of illness, but will not stop a person passing the infection on to others.

vaccine so that people can get protected. Preparation and research are already under way which should help towards making a vaccine available as quickly as possible.

## AREN'T THERE DRUGS TO TREAT PANDEMIC FLU?

There are antiviral drugs that may be effective in treating pandemic flu. Stockpiles of these are being built up. They will be used in the most effective way to treat those at risk of serious illness.

- It is difficult to identify in advance those groups of people who will develop more serious illness and who need them most.
- It is not possible to know the effectiveness of these drugs until the virus is circulating.
- It is possible that the pandemic flu virus may develop resistance to the antiviral drugs over time.
- We are already building a stockpile of antiviral drugs in the UK.
- How many people we can treat will depend on when a flu pandemic occurs and how far the stockpile has been built up.

## IF IT ARRIVES IN THE UK, HOW CAN I PROTECT MYSELF AND MY FAMILY AGAINST CATCHING IT?

The virus is spread through the air when people cough or sneeze. There are some basic measures that you can take to reduce the risk of infection. Face masks will have little place in preventing the spread of the virus but you can:

- cover your mouth and nose when coughing or sneezing, using a tissue whenever possible
- dispose of dirty tissues promptly and carefully – bag and bin them
- avoid non-essential travel and large crowds of people whenever possible
- maintain good hygiene – washing hands frequently in soap and water protects against picking the virus up from surfaces and passing it on

## KEY FACTS ABOUT

Pandemic flu spreads very rapidly because people will have no immunity

Pandemic flu is likely to be more severe than 'ordinary' flu

Groups at particular risk won't be known until the disease starts to circulate – they may be different from those in 'ordinary' flu years

- clean hard surfaces (e.g. kitchen worktops, door handles) frequently, using a normal cleaning product
- make sure your children follow this advice.

## HOW WILL I KNOW IF PANDEMIC FLU HAS REACHED THE UK?

The World Health Organization has an international system in place to watch out for pandemic flu. The UK government has an Influenza Pandemic Contingency Plan which will be put into action. It includes work to be undertaken now to improve our preparedness. If it looks as if a pandemic is going to reach the UK, the government will issue warnings and advise on the best course of action that people can take.

## PANDEMIC FLU

Antivirals are being stockpiled but they have limitations – their effectiveness won't be known until the virus is circulating

Until the virus is identified it will not be possible to make a specific vaccine

## MORE INFORMATION

If you would like more information

- visit [www.dh.gov.uk/pandemicflu](http://www.dh.gov.uk/pandemicflu)
- visit [www.nhsdirect.nhs.uk](http://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

In the event of a flu pandemic there will be announcements on the television, radio and in the newspapers.



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This document is also available at  
[www.dh.gov.uk/pandemicflu](http://www.dh.gov.uk/pandemicflu)

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