

# Pandemic influenza

## Your questions answered

This fact sheet answers your questions about pandemic influenza.

### What is pandemic influenza?

Pandemic influenza describes the spread of an influenza (flu) virus within the population that does not normally cause illness in humans. The virus is different to the seasonal influenza virus that normally affects humans, and may cause infection in many people because almost no one will be immune to it.

### How does it spread?

Pandemic influenza is very infectious and is spread from person to person by respiratory secretions in three ways:

- through the spread of droplets from one person to another (for example, from coughing or sneezing)
- by touching things that are contaminated by respiratory secretions and then touching your mouth, eye or nose
- through the spread of particles in the air in crowded populations in enclosed spaces.

### How can I protect myself and others from influenza?

There are some simple, but important, personal hygiene measures you can take to stop the spread of influenza:

- Handwashing is one of the most important measures to prevent the spread of infection. Wash your hands, especially after being in contact with someone who has a respiratory infection, particularly children. In the event of a pandemic, it is recommended that you avoid shaking hands. Everyone should get into the habit of washing their hands before meals, after using the toilet, and after they cough, sneeze or blow their nose. Tissues should be disposed of in the waste immediately after use.
- Cough/sneeze hygiene is important. When you cough or sneeze, turn away from other people and cover your mouth or nose with tissues. Dispose of the tissues then wash your hands.
- Limit contact with other people and things. Don't visit people who have the flu unless it is absolutely necessary. If a member of your family has the flu, keep their personal items, such as towels, separate from the rest of the family. Clean surfaces, such as bathroom sinks and taps, kitchen sinks and counters, after the sick person has handled them.
- Remember not to share eating utensils, food or drinks. You should also try to stay one metre or more from sick people.

### If I were exposed to pandemic influenza, how long would it take for me to get sick?

The time from being exposed to becoming unwell varies from one to seven days, but is usually one to three days.

### If I have influenza, how long will I be infectious for?

The period of time when you can infect other people is usually from one day before (although rare) the onset of illness and for approximately seven days.

In children aged 12 years or younger, the infectious period is longer – a maximum of 21 days after the onset of illness.

## What are the symptoms?

The symptoms of pandemic flu are the same as normal flu and include fever, headache, tiredness, dry cough, sore throat, runny or stuffy nose and muscle aches.

Influenza in children usually causes at least two or three of the following symptoms: sudden onset of fever, aches and pains, severe tiredness, headache, cough, sore throat, stuffy or runny nose, nausea, vomiting, diarrhoea, noisy breathing (croup), and not eating or drinking enough.

Most symptoms resolve within two to seven days, although the cough may persist longer.

## Can pandemic flu kill people?

Yes, however, there are treatments available and ways to prevent infection from occurring in the first place. Victoria has strategies in place to reduce the spread and impact of the pandemic in the population.

## What are the complications?

Some of the complications caused by flu include a bacterial chest infection, dehydration and worsening of chronic medical conditions, such as heart disease, asthma or diabetes. Children may get sinus problems and ear infections as complications from the flu. People aged 65 years and older and those of any age with chronic medical conditions are at highest risk for serious complications of flu.

## How is pandemic flu prevented and treated?

The treatment of influenza includes rest, adequate fluid intake and nutrition, and taking medications to help with fever and pain, such as aspirin (not in children) and paracetamol.

Antibiotics do not work against viruses, so they have no effect on influenza. Some people may need antibiotics because they have a secondary infection, such as a chest infection like pneumococcal pneumonia, as well as influenza. Those who are severely affected may need hospitalisation, supplemental oxygen therapy and respiratory support through artificial ventilation.

There are currently two antiviral drugs that can provide short-term protection against influenza (prophylaxis) or shorten the course of infection if given early in the disease (treatment). These are oseltamivir (common name: Tamiflu) and zanamivir (common name: Relenza) and both of these must be prescribed by a doctor.

The effectiveness of antivirals in treating pandemic influenza is unclear. The Victorian health management plan for pandemic influenza provides for some limited use for the management of cases and contacts. However, in the event of a pandemic, these medications may be in short supply. The plan allows for those most at risk to be provided medications first.

## Further information

### Better Health Channel

[www.betterhealth.vic.gov.au](http://www.betterhealth.vic.gov.au)

### Department of Health and Human Services:

[www.health.vic.gov.au/pandemicinfluenza](http://www.health.vic.gov.au/pandemicinfluenza)

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Authorised and published by the Victorian Government, 1 Treasury Place, Melbourne.

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