pandemic flu:

be aware

and prepare
Today, anxiety about getting the flu has taken on a different meaning. Instead of just worrying about the discomfort of flu symptoms and the inconvenience of missing a day or two of work, there’s greater concern about a potential flu pandemic and the impact one would have on our lives. No one knows when the next flu pandemic will occur or how severe it will be. But the avian influenza, or “bird flu,” virus in the headlines has many people wondering just how close we are to one.

here to help

We want to help you better understand this important issue. There are steps all of us can take today to be prepared. This brochure will help you learn the facts and put a plan in place to protect yourself and your family in the event of a health emergency. We’ve listed the Web sites of some trusted resources at the end of this brochure so that you can continue to stay informed and prepared.
questions and answers

Q. What’s the difference between seasonal flu, bird flu and pandemic flu?

A. **Seasonal flu** is caused by influenza viruses. It occurs every year and can affect anywhere from 5% to 20% of the population in the U.S. (In New England, flu season usually begins in December and can last into March or April.) This type of flu causes respiratory disease that’s usually mild, but can sometimes lead to more severe disease or death in infants, elders or those with chronic health problems. The annual flu vaccine can prevent or reduce the severity of seasonal flu.

**Avian flu**, or “bird flu,” is also caused by influenza viruses and occurs naturally among wild birds. The H5N1 strain currently circulating in Asia, Africa and Europe has caused significant illness and death among wild birds and domestic poultry. This strain of “bird flu” is not easily passed to humans. But, some people have become sick after extensive direct contact with domestic poultry.

**Pandemic flu** occurs when a new strain of influenza virus emerges that is easily transmitted from person to person and to which we have no natural protection. Influenza pandemics occurred in 1918, 1957 and 1968.

Q. Will a pandemic flu occur? If so, when?

A. Many scientists believe it’s a matter of time until the next influenza pandemic occurs. However, the timing and severity of the next pandemic cannot be predicted.

Q. Why won’t the seasonal flu vaccine protect people against pandemic flu?

A. Influenza vaccines provide the best protection against viruses closely related to the vaccine strains. Current seasonal influenza vaccines protect against the H3N2 and H1N1 strains of the virus. A vaccine made from these strains would not provide protection from influenza viruses such as H5N1 that are not closely related.
Q. How would vaccines be distributed if a pandemic flu breaks out?

A. Most likely, the federal government will work with manufacturers, distributors and states, and the states will develop distribution plans at the local level. States are already developing and improving plans to distribute a vaccine rapidly. These plans build on experience gained from other emergencies.

In addition, influenza vaccine makers already have systems in place to distribute vaccine.

Fairness in vaccine distribution and use during a pandemic is important. Protecting people at high risk and protecting essential day-to-day services (such as health care, police and fire services) are also important considerations.

Q. Can I get vaccinated against pandemic flu?

A. Not yet; vaccines against pandemic flu do not yet exist. Like the seasonal flu vaccine, a pandemic flu vaccine would have to be made from the virus that’s causing the pandemic. We can’t predict which influenza virus will cause the next pandemic—although attention is currently focusing on H5N1, a pandemic could be caused by a different influenza virus, such as H7N7. Therefore, until a pandemic strikes, there’s no way to know which virus to use to make the vaccine.

continued
This also means that there will be a delay between the start of a pandemic and the time that effective vaccines become available. If a pandemic strikes, be sure to take all the precautions you can to avoid getting sick.

Q. What age groups are most likely to be affected by a flu pandemic?

A. Scientists can’t predict the specific consequences of an influenza pandemic. Because few if any people would have immunity to the virus, all age groups would be at risk. Infants, the elderly, and those with underlying health conditions will probably face the highest risk for hospitalization and death. However, in the 1918 pandemic, most deaths occurred in young adults.

Q. What are pandemic alert phases and which phase are we in?

A. The World Health Organization developed an alert system to help inform the world about the seriousness of a pandemic. The alert system has six phases, with Phase 1 having the lowest risk of human cases of pandemic flu, and Phase 6 representing a pandemic in progress.

According to WHO, the world is presently in Phase 3. This means that there is a new influenza virus subtype causing disease in humans, but is not yet spreading in an easily transmittable and sustainable manner among humans.
Q. How would a pandemic flu affect communities and businesses?

A. If a severe influenza pandemic occurs, many people could become sick at the same time and would be unable to go to work. Many would stay at home to care for sick family members. Schools and businesses might close to try to prevent disease spread. Large group gatherings might be canceled. Public transportation might be scarce. These are examples of challenges that local communities, schools, civic organizations and businesses are working together on to plan for a pandemic response.

Q. What other strategies will help protect Americans?

A. In the event of a pandemic, certain public health measures may be important to help limit the spread of infection as effectively as possible. The following actions could include:

- Treating sick and exposed people with antivirals
- Isolating sick people in hospitals, at their homes, or in other facilities
- Identifying and quarantining exposed people
- Closing schools and workplaces as needed
- Canceling public events
- Restricting travel

In addition, people should protect themselves by:

- Washing hands frequently with soap and water
- Staying away from people who are sick
- Staying home if sick
what you can do today to prepare

• **Take common-sense precautions.** Avoid close contact with people who are sick. If you’re sick or have symptoms, keep your distance from others to protect them. Stay home from work or school and stay in touch with your doctor.

• **Practice good health habits.** When sneezing or coughing, cover your nose and mouth with a tissue or your sleeve. Wash your hands often and thoroughly. If soap isn’t available, use alcohol-based hand rubs or gel sanitizers. Get plenty of sleep, avoid smoking, be active, manage stress, drink plenty of fluids and eat nutritious foods.

• **Talk to your family and loved ones.** Make plans for caring for family members, particularly those with special needs, should they become ill.

• **Keep generic medical supplies on hand.** For example, soap or alcohol-based hand wash; fever-reducing medicines, a thermometer, fluids with electrolytes, and tissues.
• **Anticipate shortages and plan accordingly.** In the event of a pandemic, items such as common prescription medications, perishable foods, water and common emergency supplies (batteries and flashlights) may be hard to find. Stock up on any items you can.

• **Anticipate and plan for disruptions to your regular routine.** Schools may be closed; it may be difficult or impossible to go to work; transportation services may be severely limited or shut down; public and community services may not be available.

• **Fight the seasonal flu.** Get a flu shot (even if you’re not considered high risk).

for more information ...

www.pandemicflu.gov
(U.S. Department of Health and Human Services)

www.mass.gov/dph
(Massachusetts Department of Public Health)

www.cdc.gov/flu
(The Centers for Disease Control)

www.who.int/en
(The World Health Organization)

www.fchp.org/members/healthwise.aspx
(Healthwise® Knowledgebase)
glossary

**antiviral**: Drug that are used to prevent or cure a disease caused by a virus, by interfering with the ability of the virus to multiply in number or spread from cell to cell.

**contagious**: A contagious disease is easily spread from one person to another by contact with the infectious agent that causes the disease. The agent is typically found in droplets of liquid particles made by coughing or sneezing, in contaminated food utensils, or in water or food.

**epidemic**: A disease occurring suddenly in a community, region or country in numbers clearly in excess of normal. See **pandemic**.

**H5N1**: A variant of avian influenza, which is a type of influenza virulent in birds. It was first identified in Italy in the early 1900s and is now known to exist worldwide.

**immune system**: The cells, tissues and organs that help the body to resist infection and disease by producing antibodies and/or altered cells that inhibit the multiplication of the infectious agent.

**infectious agent**: Any organism, such as a pathogenic virus, parasite, or bacterium, that is capable of invading body tissues, multiplying, and causing disease.

**influenza**: A serious disease caused by viruses that infect the respiratory tract.

**pandemic**: The worldwide outbreak of a disease in numbers clearly in excess of normal. See **epidemic**.
**seasonal flu:** A respiratory illness that can be transmitted person to person. Most people have some immunity, and a vaccine is available. This is also known as the common flu or winter flu.

**social distancing:** To deliberately increase distance between individuals, such as staying home when ill (unless seeking medical care), avoiding large gatherings, telecommuting, and school closures.

**strain:** A group of organisms within a species or variety.

**vaccine:** A preparation consisting of antigens of a disease-causing organism which, when introduced into the body, stimulates the production of specific antibodies or altered cells. This produces an immunity to the disease-causing organism. The antigen in the preparation can be whole disease-causing organisms (killed or weakened) or parts of these organisms.

**virus:** Any of various simple submicroscopic parasites of plants, animals, and bacteria that often cause disease and that consist essentially of a core of RNA or DNA surrounded by a protein coat. Unable to replicate without a host cell, viruses are typically not considered living organisms.
Sources used for this brochure include the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, Trust for America’s Health and the Massachusetts Department of Public Health.