

Welsh Assembly Government Pandemic posted May 2009

<http://wales.gov.uk/topics/health/protection/communicabledisease/flu/questions/?lang=en>

Frequently asked questions

What is the difference between a flu pandemic and 'ordinary' flu?

'Ordinary' flu is seasonal and produces the outbreaks of flu we see in the UK every winter. For most people this is an unpleasant though not life-threatening illness. The strains of ordinary flu can be predicted with some confidence so that an appropriate vaccine can be prepared in advance each year. Pandemic flu can occur at any time of the year and affects many more people than 'ordinary' flu. It is much more serious and is associated with a higher severity of illness and a higher risk of death. Unlike ordinary flu, people of all age groups are at risk of infection and severe illness. Because the virus that causes the next pandemic will be new, there will not be a vaccine ready at the start to protect against it.

What are the symptoms?

Symptoms are similar to those of ordinary flu but generally more severe. They include sudden onset of fever, cough, headache, severe weakness and fatigue, aching muscles and joints and respiratory symptoms such as sore throat and runny nose. Complications could include bronchitis, pneumonia or possible death.

How can I avoid getting pandemic flu?

There are ways to reduce the risk of becoming infected. These include:

- frequent hand-washing with soap and water (especially after having been outside) - to prevent acquiring the virus from contact with infected people or contaminated surfaces;
- good respiratory hygiene: by covering your nose and mouth when coughing or sneezing, to limit the spread of the virus;
- after blowing your nose with tissues ensure safe disposal by bagging and binning; and avoiding crowds and large gatherings where possible.

Should I take my children out of school?

There is no immediate risk of a pandemic and no action is necessary now. Once a pandemic has emerged, if your child has flu or you think they may have flu, they should be kept at home and contact with other children minimised.

Will schools be closed when the pandemic hits?

School closures may have to be considered at a local level due to shortages of teachers and / or pupils.

Mathematical modelling is being undertaken to understand what impact school closures might have on the spread of flu. This is one of the areas that we will continue to keep under review and the decision will be informed by emerging information about the nature of the virus and the at risk groups.

What should I do if I think I've got pandemic flu?

If you think you or a member of your family may be infected by the virus:

- stay at home and limit contact with others as far as possible;
- rest until the symptoms improve;
- take medicines to reduce the symptoms (for example, paracetamol, ibuprofen or aspirin but do not give aspirin to children under 16 years of age); and
- drink plenty of fluids.

If your symptoms are getting worse, despite your actions, contact your doctor or phone NHS Direct Wales on 0845 46 47.

Spread of pandemic

Can a pandemic be prevented at an early stage?

Efforts will be made internationally to try to control a pandemic at an early stage. However, pandemic flu is highly infectious and because whole populations will be susceptible to the new virus, it is likely to continue to spread despite people's best efforts. If a pandemic is announced it is likely to reach the UK despite all efforts to contain it.

How will it spread to the UK?

Most likely through people becoming infected in an affected part of the world and bringing the virus back to the UK. The virus is highly infectious and easily passed between people by breathing air containing the virus produced when an infected person talks, sneezes or coughs. It can spread through hand/face contact after touching an infected person or a surface contaminated with the virus. The symptoms will develop quite quickly (between two and three days) after infection.

How will we know it has reached the UK?

The UK has its own network of virology laboratories that refer unusual viruses to the National Influenza Reference Laboratory for precise identification. This will help us identify the pandemic strain as early as possible.

How long will the pandemic last in the UK?

It is estimated that pandemic flu will be widespread in the UK within about ten weeks of it first arriving in the country, and will last for about two to three months. There may be a second wave of infection a few weeks or months later. These times are estimates, and may change as more information becomes available.

Who will be at risk during a flu pandemic?

Everyone is potentially at risk of being infected during a flu pandemic, as practically no-one will have immunity to the virus. Certain groups may be at greater risk than others; we will not know for certain who they will be until the virus starts circulating.

How many people in the UK are likely to catch flu during the pandemic?

This has varied between the pandemics that have been most widely studied in the 20th century. For planning purposes, the UK framework advises a range of considerations, with the worst case scenario being 50% of the population.

Are many people likely to die?

This will depend on several factors such as how virulent the virus proves to be, which age groups are mainly affected and how effective antiviral drugs are in treating people.

Preventative measures

What alert level are we at now?

The World Health Organization (WHO) has developed an alert system to help inform the world about the current threat of a pandemic emerging. The alert system has six phases. Phase 1 has the lowest risk of human cases and Phase 6 is when the pandemic is formally declared.

The world is presently in Phase 3 of the Pandemic Alert. This means that there is a new influenza virus subtype causing disease in humans, but the virus is not yet spreading in an efficient (easily transmittable) and sustainable manner among humans.

Will we be purchasing masks to slow the spread of infection as other countries have done?

We have recommended the use of face masks for healthcare professionals who would be working closely with infected patients. Stock levels of masks and protective clothing normally available in the NHS and their supply chain are being reviewed. Supplies of essential materials will be augmented by stockpiles if necessary.

What is the advice to travellers going to affected areas?

Advice to travellers will be issued by the Foreign and Commonwealth Office as necessary as the situation develops.

Will people from South East Asia be prevented from entering the UK?

There is currently no bar on international travel. This would be reviewed as necessary.

What actions should people in the UK take right now to prevent themselves getting ill?

Currently there is no need for people to take any special action in the UK. Announcements will be made in the press and on television should this situation change.

Antivirals

What about antiviral drugs?

Antiviral drugs are special medicines for the treatment of certain viral infections and they will play an important role in treating pandemic flu. Treatment with antiviral drugs can be expected to shorten the duration of the disease, alleviate symptoms and reduce complications and serious illness.

Does Wales have contingency stockpiles of antiviral drugs and other essential pharmaceuticals?

Wales, alongside the other UK countries is stockpiling antivirals.

How many antivirals have the UK Government purchased?

The UK Government have purchased enough antiviral drugs to treat 50% of the population.

How will the stockpile be used?

The stockpile of antivirals is intended to treat 50% of the population which is in accordance with the UK Government planning assumptions of a clinical attack rate affecting up to 50% of the population.

Prioritisation

Antivirals will need to be prioritised, initially to healthcare workers, and to those who fall into one of the clinical 'at risk' groups (as defined for seasonal flu.). Final decisions regarding prioritisation will be made on the basis of information emerging from the early stages of the pandemic about the virus and those groups most at risk. The UK National Influenza Pandemic Committee will provide additional advice as required during the pandemic.

Vaccines

Is there a vaccine ready?

Not yet. Vaccine will offer the best form of protection against pandemic flu. However, a vaccine cannot be manufactured until the exact flu strain is known. On behalf of the four UK countries, DH is working closely with other countries, the WHO, and the European Commission and are in regular contact with manufacturers to ensure that a vaccine can be developed as quickly as possible once a pandemic influenza strain emerges. This will allow arrangements to be put in place to ensure production of vaccine for the UK population.

How long will it take to develop a new vaccine?

The vaccine will take at least four to six months to produce. The time taken in producing a vaccine reflects the complex nature of vaccine manufacture. Once the virus has been identified and a suitable vaccine developed then urgent production will begin.

Who will be given the vaccine?

When stocks of a pandemic vaccine start to become available, priority may have to be given to certain groups. Healthcare workers and other essential service key workers may need to be vaccinated first, as it will be important to maintain health and other essential services. Those groups most at risk of serious illness will be a priority to receive the vaccine as supplies increase. Final decisions regarding prioritisation will be made on the basis of information emerging from the early stages of the pandemic about the virus and those groups most at risk.