

Attention Businesses! This sample employee newsletter article has been prepared for your use. If you wish to customize and reprint this article for your company newsletter, please contact Public Health for an electronic copy. Jo Ellen Warner is the staff contact at joellen.warner@metrokc.gov or 206-296-4313.

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Pandemic Influenza and You

World health experts want you to take action now to protect yourself from a global health threat—pandemic influenza.

Scientists are closely monitoring what could be the birth of a new and potentially deadly strain of influenza virus that began in Asia and has spread to Russia, and now threatens Eastern Europe. It may be only one flock of birds away from the U.S.

The Bird Flu Connection

The bird flu virus originates in wild birds and is spread by migrating flocks that carry the devastating disease to domestic flocks of chickens and ducks. Hundreds of millions of domestic chickens and ducks have died from the virus or been slaughtered to slow the spread of the disease.

Influenza viruses are highly unstable and have the ability to change rapidly, potentially jumping from one animal species to another. Scientists fear the bird flu virus could evolve into a form that is easily spread between people, resulting in an extremely contagious and lethal disease.

At this time, the virus has not developed the ability to pass easily from person to person and cause outbreaks in humans. But the virus is changing and has become capable of infecting mammals--tigers and pigs--making the danger of a human pandemic quite real.

Human Cases So Far

There have been some human infections so far that have been blamed on direct contact with infected chickens and their droppings. Over 50% of those who have contracted the disease have died.

Different From Seasonal Flu

A pandemic flu would be a much more serious flu virus than seen in a typical flu season. Different from the typical strains of flu, humans would have no or little natural resistance to a new strain. Also, there is a vaccine for seasonal flu, which is prepared each season

against new variations of the seasonal influenza. The current influenza vaccine will not protect against pandemic flu.

Treatment

Flu drugs exist that may be used both to prevent people from catching bird flu and to treat those who have it. Tamiflu and Relenza are expected to work – though supplies could run out quickly if an outbreak occurs.

Currently there is no vaccine, although scientists are working to develop one. Most likely, a vaccine would not be ready in time to stop a worldwide human outbreak.

Potential United States and King County Impacts:

The CDC predicts that that as much as 25% to 30% of the US population could be affected by a pandemic. Undoubtedly, a pandemic flu would be disruptive and costly to business. Up to 35% of the workforce could be affected at any given time. The economic impact in the United States could reach \$166.5 billion

In King County, we could see 1.2 million people infected in the first 6 weeks; 245,000 - 612,000 clinically ill; 180,000 - 470,000 outpatient medical visits; 24,436 – 57,216 people hospitalized, and 600 – 2,700 deaths.

When is it expected?

According to the World Health Organization, the world is “now overdue” for an influenza pandemic, since mass epidemics have occurred every 20 to 30 years. It has been nearly 40 years since the last one.

Protect Yourself, Your Family, and Co-workers

Public Health – Seattle & King County is our partner in pandemic flu preparedness. They advise us to:

- **Stop germs from spreading.**
 - Stay home when you are sick
 - Cover your mouth and nose with tissue when coughing and sneezing
 - Wash your hands often. The key is to wash thoroughly with warm water, and to wash frequently.
 - When hand washing is not possible, use an alcohol based hand cleaner
 - Avoid touching your mouth, nose, and eyes
 - Have a good home disaster preparedness plan
<http://www.metrokc.gov/prepare/preparerespond/prepared.aspx>
 - Visit Public Health’s [Stop Germs](http://www.metrokc.gov/health/stopgerms) web site
www.metrokc.gov/health/stopgerms

- **Stay informed.** These web sites provide regularly updated information about bird flu and pandemic flu:
 - Public Health-Seattle & King County at www.metrokc.gov/health
 - Pandemic Flu information from the Washington State Dept. of Health
<http://www.doh.wa.gov/panflu/>
 - Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC):
<http://www.cdc.gov/flu/pandemic/>
 - www.Pandemicflu.gov
The official U.S. government Web site for information on pandemic flu and avian influenza

- **Sign up for Public Health News Alerts:**
www.metrokc.gov/health/about/subscriptions

- **If you plan to travel,** check the CDC web site for travel advisories:
www.cdc.gov