

# Human Influenza Pandemic

What your organisation needs to do



A Victorian  
Government  
initiative



## It's time to get ready

In 2007 the Victorian Government released the Victorian Human Influenza Pandemic Plan (VHIPP) which outlines how the state would manage a pandemic. The VHIPP and its supporting plans, detail how the Government plans to contain the spread of a human influenza pandemic – but they also call on you, and your organisation, to begin planning for this threat.

This brochure contains advice on how you can contribute to protecting your workplace and your community in the event of a pandemic.

The threat of a pandemic has been in the news for some time, mainly because of the spread of avian influenza, or bird flu, in parts of Asia, Africa and Europe. At the moment, we can be reassured by the fact that it's rare for humans to contract avian influenza and there's very little evidence of it passing from human to human. For a pandemic to occur, avian influenza would need to mutate and become easily passed from human to human.

Nonetheless, a pandemic threat does exist, so it's important that you're fully informed about it and that you have detailed plans in place for maintaining your organisation's operations – and for protecting your colleagues, customers and business partners.

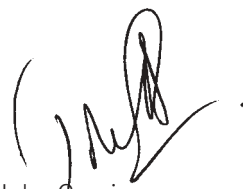
If you work in government, the health sector, essential services or for a public infrastructure provider, it's vitally important that your organisation has a business continuity plan that will enable you to continue operating during a pandemic.

The greatest challenge involved in planning for a pandemic is that it's impossible to predict when it will occur and how virulent it will be. History tells us that pandemics are recurring events – typically happening at intervals ranging from 10–50 years. The 'Spanish Flu' pandemic of 1918 was the most devastating health crisis of the last century, causing an estimated 50 million deaths. There have been two subsequent pandemics (in 1957 and 1968) that claimed a combined total of about three million lives worldwide.

While we can't predict the severity of a future pandemic, we can expect that it will cause the kind of social and economic upheaval that most of us haven't experienced in our lifetime. For example, we could expect workforce absenteeism to be as high as 30 per cent and that the education and transport systems could shut down for a period of time in an attempt to slow the spread of the virus.

While the Victorian Government has developed a number of plans and will lead the State's response to a pandemic, we need organisations like yours to be properly prepared for this type of threat.

I urge you to read this brochure closely and to take action immediately.



Dr John Carnie  
Chief Health Officer, Victoria.



## Five things you can do now

### 1. Appoint a pandemic planning coordinator

Your pandemic planning coordinator (or coordination team) should develop your organisation's response to the pandemic threat as well as strategies that will enable business continuity in the event of a pandemic. The pandemic planning coordinator should also be responsible for testing, reviewing and activating the pandemic plan.

### 2. Review your business continuity plans

Identify your organisation's core activities – and the employees and other resources that will be required to maintain operations during a pandemic. Consider how a pandemic may impact on the demand for your organisation's services. You may need to develop your plans for dealing with issues such as large-scale employee absenteeism and the closure of other businesses or infrastructure.

### 3. Protect the health of your staff and customers

You should encourage hygiene awareness and establish policies that can prevent influenza spreading at work (for example, by promoting hand washing and the correct etiquette for coughing and sneezing).

Consider how your organisation would implement 'social distancing' policies during a pandemic to minimise face-to-face contact among employees – and between employees and customers.

### 4. Develop your communication plan

Establish an emergency communication plan that identifies key contacts, a communication chain and the process for communicating with employees, customers and other stakeholders. Consider developing a website or installing a hotline that communicates the threat to your organisation and your response.

### 5. Inform your employees and stakeholders

You can reassure your staff and customers by informing them about your pandemic planning. Develop communication programs that explain the basics of an influenza pandemic, such as prevention techniques, as well as communicating your organisation's planned response strategies.

The *Business Continuity Guide for Australian Businesses* and additional planning tools are available at: [www.industry.gov.au/pandemicbusinesscontinuity](http://www.industry.gov.au/pandemicbusinesscontinuity)



## What your organisation must do

### Planning for a pandemic

The reality is that all organisations will be affected by an influenza pandemic, but effective planning may help to reduce the spread of the virus, decrease the number of sick, maintain services and reduce the social and economic consequences.

A primary issue for your organisation during a pandemic will be employee absenteeism. Staff will be absent because of their own illness or the need to care for a family member – or because they fear contracting pandemic influenza at work. Your organisation's supply chain may also be affected by the closure of other businesses, a reduction in the transport system, and the introduction of border closures and quarantine measures.

Many of the key elements of a pandemic plan are immediately transferable from your business continuity plan (that is delegating responsibility, communication, identifying core business elements and planning for supply-chain disruption). However, there is a significant difference between the two. Business continuity plans are often focused on one localised event, whereas a pandemic plan needs to account for protracted staff absenteeism compounded by the closure of other businesses, organisations and infrastructure.

### Managing during a pandemic

Strong leadership and access to accurate, simple information are two crucial elements to managing the fear associated with a pandemic.

In an emergency situation people need immediate access to practical and social support.

You can maintain the psychological health of your organisation by providing updates and by giving staff the chance to ask questions.

Providing factual information can also help manage people's reactions. This information helps people to understand that feelings of worry and distress are normal.



## Frequently Asked Questions

### What is influenza?

Influenza is caused by a virus that usually attacks the nose, throat and lungs. Some common symptoms include high fever, headache, coughing, a sore throat and aches and pains. Influenza infection typically lasts for a week and is usually transmitted by coughing and sneezing.

### How is influenza different to a cold?

Influenza is more than a bad cold. Cold symptoms usually last only for a few days while influenza can last up to a week. Influenza symptoms include a high fever, muscular pains and shivering attacks which are not associated with a common cold. In Australia, an influenza vaccine is recommended for older and at-risk groups in March or April each year.

For more information about influenza immunisation visit: [www.betterhealth.vic.gov.au](http://www.betterhealth.vic.gov.au)

### What is an influenza pandemic?

An influenza pandemic occurs when a highly infectious new strain of the virus emerges that humans have no immunity to. During a pandemic, the virus spreads rapidly around the world causing high rates of illness and death – and resulting in severe social and economic disruption.

Pandemics are rare, but history tells us they are a recurring event, typically occurring every 10–50 years. There were three pandemics in the 20th century – in 1918, 1957 and 1968. The 1918 pandemic (known as the ‘Spanish Flu’) was the most devastating – it caused an estimated 50 million deaths worldwide.

### What is avian influenza?

Also known as ‘bird flu’, avian influenza is an infectious disease of birds caused by the influenza virus. Avian influenza can occasionally infect pigs and on rare occasions it has infected other domestic animals as well as humans. Since 2003, a virulent strain of avian influenza (with the scientific description H5N1) has infected birds in a series of outbreaks in Asia, Africa and Europe. Between 2003 and March 2007, over 280 humans were infected with the disease and unfortunately over half of them died. Despite these deaths, it is still extremely rare for avian influenza to pass from bird to human.

### Is avian influenza likely to cause a pandemic?

In its current state, avian influenza cannot cause a pandemic, but it’s impossible to predict how that might change in the future. Three conditions must occur in order to trigger a pandemic:

1. A new influenza subtype, like H5N1, must emerge
2. It must be capable of causing disease in humans
3. The virus must be capable of being passed easily and rapidly from person to person.

Currently, the H5N1 avian influenza virus does not easily pass from birds to humans and there is only very limited evidence of human-to-human transmission. The H5N1 virus strain would have to mutate into a form that passes easily from human to human before it could cause a pandemic.



## Do we have a vaccine to stop the spread of a pandemic?

Because the strain of influenza that may cause a pandemic has not yet emerged, there is no vaccine available. Once the pandemic virus emerges, it would need to be identified and characterised before commercial production of a vaccine could begin. The World Health Organization estimates it will take about six months to produce significant quantities of the pandemic vaccine.

Anti-viral medications have shown to be effective against avian influenza virus. However, mass administration of anti-viral drugs is not recommended because it could accelerate the development of drug-resistant virus strains. If a pandemic occurs, Australia's limited supply of anti-viral drugs would be administered to at-risk groups, such as health care workers.

## How else can we stop the spread of a pandemic?

Because the influenza virus is highly infectious, personal hygiene will play a crucial role in preventing the spread of infections. Some of the basic hygiene measures that would be highlighted during a pandemic include:

- regular hand washing with soap and water
- covering your mouth when coughing or sneezing
- the careful disposal of used tissues.

In the event of a pandemic, we can expect a number of 'social distancing' initiatives, such as school and workplace closures and the cancellation of mass gatherings. By limiting the gatherings of large numbers of people, public health experts will be aiming to reduce the population's exposure to the pandemic virus.

## When does my organisation need to be ready?

As soon as possible. We have no way of knowing when a pandemic will occur or how severe it will be, but proper preparation is essential for containing the spread of a pandemic and maintaining essential services and infrastructure.



## How the Victorian Government is preparing

The *Victorian Human Influenza Pandemic Plan* (VHIPP) outlines the responsibilities, authorities, mechanisms and actions to prevent, respond to and recover from an influenza pandemic in Victoria. The Plan identifies and describes the relationship between existing public health and emergency management arrangements. It also describes how our state and local governments, their departments and agencies will work together on:

- **preparedness** – strategies to reduce the risk of pandemic in Victoria; preparing to respond to and recover from any emerging pandemic threats. A significant part of the planning for managing a human influenza pandemic occurs at this stage.
- **response** – human-to-human transmission of pandemic influenza anywhere in the world will trigger a well-planned and coordinated response across the breadth of government in Australia. The initial response will focus on containing the spread of the disease, then on supporting maintenance of social norms.
- **recovery** – recovery commences when the first response measures are taken. It aims to provide the necessary support and stimulus to help the Victorian community return to normal living as quickly as possible.
- **communication** – providing timely and helpful information to Victorian communities is a critical element of this plan, as communication is integral to managing all stages – prevention and preparedness, response and recovery.

All Victorian pandemic plans will sit under the VHIPP strategic framework, including:

- the *Victorian Health Management Plan for Pandemic Influenza* (VHMPPI)
- the *Human Influenza Pandemic Whole-of-Victorian Government Communication Strategy*
- *Preparing for an influenza pandemic: An information kit and workplan for general practice*
- *Victorian Human Influenza Pandemic Plan: Community Support and Recovery Sub Plan*
- action plans for all government departments.

To read the VHIPP, VHMPPI, the communication strategy, the general practice information kit and for additional information, visit the website: [www.health.vic.gov.au/pandemicinfluenza](http://www.health.vic.gov.au/pandemicinfluenza)

To read the Australian Health Management Plan for Pandemic Influenza, visit the website: [www.health.gov.au/internet/wcms/publishing.nsf/Content/ohp-pandemic-ahmpipi.htm](http://www.health.gov.au/internet/wcms/publishing.nsf/Content/ohp-pandemic-ahmpipi.htm)

To read more about how the World Health Organization is planning for a pandemic, visit the website: [www.who.int](http://www.who.int)





**For more information visit:**  
[www.health.vic.gov.au/pandemicinfluenza](http://www.health.vic.gov.au/pandemicinfluenza)

**Working together  
to protect  
our communities**

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