

Pandemic influenza (flu) – Protect yourself and your family

Your questions answered

What is pandemic flu?

An influenza pandemic occurs when a new flu virus emerges and spreads around the world, and most people do not have protection. At this stage it is expected that the characteristics of pandemic flu, such as spread and symptoms, would be the same as seasonal flu, however this cannot be confirmed until a pandemic strain emerges. It is important that during an influenza pandemic you stay up to date with advice from Department of Health and Human Services announcements, websites and hotlines.

How does it spread?

In general flu is spread in two ways:

- Respiratory droplets from an infected person's cough or sneezes (these droplets generally travel less than one metre), and
- Touching contaminated surfaces (including hands) and then touching your mouth, nose and eyes.

How can I protect myself and others from flu?

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

- 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 cold or chest 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. Alternatively, sneeze or cough into your inner elbow, then dispose of the tissues and wash your hands.
- Limit contact with other people and shared items. 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 unwell person has handled them.
- Remember not to share eating utensils, food or drinks. You should also try to stay one metre or more from unwell people.

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

The time from being exposed to flu and becoming unwell varies from one to four days, but is usually two days.

If I have flu, how long will I be infectious for?

The period of time when you can infect other people is usually from one day before the onset of illness and for approximately seven days. Children and younger adults may shed influenza virus for 10 or more days after the onset of illness and people with weakened immune systems can shed the virus for weeks.

What are the symptoms?

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

Fever may not be present in older people. Uncommon signs and symptoms may be more common in the very young and very old.

Can pandemic flu kill people?

Yes. With the appropriate medical treatment, however, the number of deaths in a pandemic can be reduced. Early antiviral medication and antibiotics (if needed) and supportive care for those with more severe illness are key to preventing serious complications of illness.

Victoria has strategies in place to reduce the spread and impact of the pandemic in the population.

What are the complications?

Most healthy people recover from flu without serious problems. However, some people are considered at risk of developing complications

Secondary complications are expected to vary widely amongst countries and communities. Vulnerable populations are expected to be more severely affected. These include:

- very young children
- the elderly
- pregnant women, particularly those in the second and third trimester
- people with diseases such as cancer or HIV/AIDS
- people who have received organ transplants
- people who take certain medications frequently
- people with chronic medical conditions such as heart disease, lung disease (e.g. asthma, emphysema, cystic fibrosis), kidney disease and diabetes.

The risk to these people increases because they may have weaker body defences (immune systems) or because when the body is affected by other conditions, it is easier for bacteria to invade the cells that have been damaged by the flu virus and cause other illnesses such as pneumonia. The flu can also stress the body so much that an underlying illness may worsen.

Some of the complications caused by flu include a bacterial chest infection (pneumonia), 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.

Preparing your household

There are several things you can do now that will help you be prepared, should a pandemic occur:

- Have plans in place for if you and your family have to stay at home for a week or so during a pandemic. Talk to your family and friends about this
- If you live alone; are a single parent of young children; or are the only person caring for a frail or disabled person, think of someone you could call upon for help if you become very ill with the flu. Discuss with the person what help you might need and how that could best be provided
- Think of someone you could call on to care for your children if their school or day care centre were to close during a pandemic but you still had to go to work. Discuss this with them
- Have a telephone network for you and the people who live close by
- Put the phone number of your family doctor and your state or territory health information line in a prominent place

- Think of someone who could help you with food and other supplies if you and your family were sick and could not leave the house
- Teach children about hand washing and cough etiquette
- Think about supplies you might need in a pandemic.

Further information

- [Better Health Channel - Flu \(influenza\)](https://www.betterhealth.vic.gov.au/health/conditionsandtreatments/flu-influenza)
<https://www.betterhealth.vic.gov.au/health/conditionsandtreatments/flu-influenza>
- [Department of Health and Human Services - Pandemic influenza](https://www2.health.vic.gov.au/emergencies/emergency-type/infectious-diseases/pandemic-influenza)
< https://www2.health.vic.gov.au/emergencies/emergency-type/infectious-diseases/pandemic-influenza>

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