

PANDEMIC INFLUENZA

FACT SHEET

WHAT IS A PANDEMIC?

- A pandemic is a worldwide epidemic of a disease. A disease epidemic occurs when there is unusually high number of cases of that disease.
- An influenza pandemic may occur when a new influenza virus appears against which the human population has no immunity. The virus begins to cause serious illness and spreads easily from person to person.
- Pandemics can be either mild or severe in terms of the number of illnesses and deaths they cause, and the severity of a pandemic can change over the course of that pandemic.
- An influenza pandemic may come and go in waves of activity, each of which can last for 6 to 12 weeks.
- The World Health Organization (WHO) uses a system of six phases of pandemic alert to inform the world of the seriousness of a pandemic threat and the need for preparedness activities.
- On June 11, 2009, the WHO raised the pandemic alert level to Phase 6, indicating that a pandemic of influenza A(H1N1) was underway. A pandemic reflects the spread of the new virus, not the severity of illness caused by the virus. For an explanation and an update on pandemic alert phases, go to www.who.int/csr/disease/avian_influenza/phase/en/index.html.

WHAT ARE THE DIFFERENT TYPES OF FLU?

- **Seasonal Influenza:** Seasonal influenza, commonly called "the flu," is caused by influenza viruses, which infect the respiratory tract (i.e., the nose, throat, lungs). Unlike many other viral respiratory infections, such as the common cold, the flu can cause severe illness and life-threatening complications in many people.
- **Avian Influenza (H5N1) (Bird Flu):** Avian influenza is an infection caused by avian (bird) influenza (flu) viruses. These influenza viruses occur naturally among birds. Wild birds worldwide carry the viruses in their intestines, but usually do not get sick from them. However, avian influenza is very contagious among birds and can make some domesticated birds, including chickens, ducks, and turkeys, very sick and kill them.
- **Influenza A(H1N1):** The symptoms of influenza usually include fever plus at least either cough or sore throat. These symptoms are often referred to as an influenza-like illness (ILI). Influenza infection can also lead to additional symptoms like headache, tiredness, runny or stuffy nose, body aches, chills, diarrhea, and vomiting. Like seasonal flu, influenza A(H1N1) infection in humans can vary in severity from mild to severe. When severe, pneumonia, respiratory failure and even death are possible. Influenza A(H1N1) is thought to spread in the same way that seasonal influenza virus spread, mainly through the coughs and sneezes of people who are sick with the virus. People may also become infected by touching something with flu viruses on it and then touching their mouth or nose.
- **Pandemic Influenza:** An influenza pandemic may occur when a new influenza virus appears against which the human population has no immunity. With the increase in global transport, as well as urbanization and overcrowded conditions in some areas, epidemics due to a new influenza virus are likely to take hold around the world, and become a pandemic faster than before.

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WHAT ARE THE POSSIBLE CONSEQUENCES?

- A severe influenza pandemic could disrupt everyday life because so many people in so many places become seriously ill at the same time.
- Impacts can range from school closings to interruptions of basic services, such as public transportation and food delivery. Due to illness, there may be significant shortages of personnel available to provide these services.
- A significant percentage of the world's population will require some form of medical care. Healthcare facilities may be overwhelmed with demands to care for both influenza and non-influenza patients, creating a shortage of hospital staff, beds, ventilators, and other supplies.
- The need for vaccine is likely to outstrip supply, and the supply of antiviral drugs is also likely to be inadequate early in a pandemic. Difficult decisions will need to be made regarding who gets antiviral drugs and vaccines.
- Current epidemiological models project that a pandemic could result in 2 to 7.4 million deaths globally. (Death rates are determined by four factors: the number of people who become infected, the virulence of the virus, the underlying characteristics and vulnerability of affected populations, and the extent to which preventive measures are implemented.)

WHAT CAN YOU DO TO PROTECT YOURSELF AND OTHERS?

- Flu vaccines are the best ways of protecting people in an influenza epidemic or pandemic. However, pandemic influenza vaccines will possibly be available months after a pandemic has been declared, and are expected to be a limited supply at first. Other measures – including personal hygiene and social distancing – should be used.
- There are everyday actions that people can take to stay healthy such as: covering your cough or sneeze, washing hands frequently, avoiding contact with sick people, staying home if you are sick, following public health advice, and staying informed, among others.
- There are several ways that individuals, families, businesses, schools, and other organizations can prepare for a flu pandemic. You can find information on how to prepare at www.who.int, www.pandemicflu.gov, and www.influenzalac.org. For specific information on Saint Lucia's activities on H1N1, visit <http://stlucia.gov.lc/flu>.
- If you get sick, antiviral drugs can make your illness milder and of shorter duration. They may also prevent serious influenza complications.
- People who are ill should delay travel plans. Returning travelers who become ill should contact their healthcare provider.
- Travelers can protect themselves and others by following simple prevention practices that apply while traveling and in daily life.