

Pandemic Influenza – What You Can Do

Pandemics are like earthquakes. We know that pandemics occur periodically, and that in some ways we are “overdue”. We do not know when the next pandemic will occur and what its impact will be. In fact, the most predictable thing about flu is its unpredictability.

However, the ingredients of a worldwide outbreak are circulating in Asia and Europe in the form of a rapidly mutating H5N1 avian influenza virus that occasionally infects and kills humans. Although only limited person-to-person spread is evident, if the virus mutates allowing easier transmission, we may face a pandemic. Or not. No one knows whether the current ingredients will explode into a worldwide outbreak or fizzle.

Regardless, the State of Maine in some ways has been preparing for a pandemic for years. The creation of the Maine Emergency Management system in the 1980s and the post-September 2001 preparedness funds have all built early detection and response systems that help Maine governments and private sector partners address emergencies, including pandemic influenza. The state’s overall plan was updated this summer, and is available for review at www.mainepublichealth.gov. We continue to exercise the plan and add details to it. We are funding regional and local pandemic influenza preparedness planning in order to help our emergency management, health care, first responders, and social service systems across the state to prepare.

What would life be like during a pandemic? While no one can fully predict how a pandemic will affect us, there are some well-agreed upon characteristics: a pandemic will mostly likely last for months, longer than other public health emergencies; the number of health care workers and first responders available to work will be reduced because of illness or needing to care for family members; medical facilities may be quickly overwhelmed and unavailable to most people; basic resources such as food and medical supplies could be limited or unevenly distributed; some workplaces and schools may be closed; and large gatherings may need to be postponed.

Fortunately, there is no evidence in Maine or the U.S. of the H5N1 avian flu currently circulating in Asia. Therefore, we have time to prepare in case it emerges as a pandemic.

What can each of us do to prepare?

First, we can make sure our homes have an emergency kit with at least three to five days’ worth of food, hydration fluids, fever-reducing medicines, and other essentials. If a pandemic occurs, we may be asked to stay home without leaving the house if we are exposed to or become ill from the flu or to take care of family members with the flu. There also may be scarce resources available in our communities, including shortages of such essentials as food and batteries on the store shelves. Therefore, an emergency kit will help us be self-sufficient for a period of days. The components of an emergency kit and how to put it together can be found at: www.mainepublichealth.gov, www.redcross.org, or www.fema.gov.

Second, we need to know how to stay connected with each other, even if face-to-face contact is not possible. Do we maintain updated email addresses and phone numbers of all our family members, close friends, and neighbors? What about those who are more vulnerable and who may especially need our contact – those who live on limited income or who are disabled? We learned from the 1998 ice storm and from witnessing the recent hurricane devastations that much of our preparedness can be summarized as “neighbor-helping-neighbor”. We will be able to help each other much better if we prepare to stay connected.

Third, we can make sure we and others around us are practicing good hygiene. By washing our hands frequently, covering our sneezes and coughs, and staying home when we are ill, we can stop the spread of flu and other harmful germs. Posters reminding people of these measures can be downloaded and printed at <http://www.maine.gov/dhhs/boh/Flu%20Posters.htm>.

Additionally, we can seek a flu shot before the regular flu season, especially if we are in one of the high-risk groups. Although there is no commercially available vaccine against the H5N1 avian flu strain in Asia, getting a flu shot will help us maintain our overall health during the regular flu season.

We know about 5,000 Mainers died from influenza during the last major pandemic in 1918-1919. Tragically, many were young adults who died within hours of becoming ill. They often left orphaned children and stunned loved ones.

However, it's important to know that about three-quarters of a million Mainers lived. They survived despite not having antibiotics, antiviral medications, vaccines, and medical care as we know it. We believe they survived in part because they were able to stay home and be self-sufficient for days at a time, they were able to take care of those who were ill at home, they practiced basic hygiene, and they were able to stay connected with one another. These successful measures can help us increase our odds of surviving the next pandemic, whether it occurs soon or far into the future.

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