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Pandemic vs. Seasonal Flu: What's the Difference?

Seasonal flu is a contagious respiratory disease that is caused by influenza viruses. It occurs every year, typically in the fall and winter. Seasonal flu can cause serious illness and even death, and it poses a risk for people with weak immune systems. However, seasonal flu is usually not severe in most people, because they are already partly protected by having had a similar flu virus before. Annual flu shots also play a key role in protecting people from seasonal flu.

Pandemic flu is different and can be much worse. It can cause a worldwide outbreak of a new form of flu virus, which spreads easily from person to person because they have no immunity. Pandemic flu occurs when a flu virus goes through changes (called “mutations”) that create a new virus the body has never

encountered. The infected person has no immunity to the new virus and is not prepared to fight it.

Because the new pandemic flu virus would be able to travel easily from person to person, it could spread quickly over long distances to millions of people worldwide. The result would be a flu pandemic.

During the 20th century, three serious influenza pandemics — the Spanish Flu in 1918, the Asian Flu in 1957, and the Hong Kong Flu in 1968 — killed millions of people. Because flu pandemics tend to occur in cycles, and because there has not been a major flu pandemic in many years, experts believe that we are due for one.

Seasonal Flu	Pandemic Flu
Outbreaks follow predictable seasonal patterns; occurs annually, usually in winter, in temperate climates	Occurs rarely (Three times in 20th century)
Usually some immunity built up from previous exposure	No previous exposure; little or no pre-existing immunity
Healthy adults usually not at risk for serious complications; the very young, the elderly and those with certain underlying health conditions are at increased risk	Healthy people may be at increased risk for serious complications
Health systems can usually meet public and patient needs	Health systems may be overwhelmed
Vaccine developed based on known flu strains and available for annual flu season	Vaccine probably would not be available in the early stages of a pandemic
Adequate supplies of antiviral medications are usually available	Effective antiviral medications may be in limited supply
Average U.S. deaths approximately 36,000/year	Number of deaths could be quite high (the U.S. 1918 death toll was approximately 500,000)
Symptoms: fever, cough, runny nose, muscle pain. Deaths often caused by complications, such as pneumonia.	Symptoms may be more severe and complications more frequent
Generally causes modest impact on society (some school closings, encouraging people who are sick to stay home)	May cause major impact on society (widespread restrictions on travel, closings of schools and businesses, cancellation of large public gatherings)
Manageable impact on domestic and world economy	Potential for severe impact on domestic and world economy

Pandemic Flu FAQ



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Q Where does pandemic flu come from?

A. Influenza viruses are constantly changing and producing new strains. Pandemics occur when a strain is so different from previous strains that few people, if any, are immune to it. This allows the new strain to spread widely and rapidly, affecting many hundreds of thousands of people worldwide.

Q What is bird flu, and is that the same as H5N1?

A. Avian influenza, or bird flu, is caused by a virus that occurs naturally in birds. Wild birds can carry the virus without getting sick from it, but domestic birds that get infected often die. H5N1 is the scientific name for a specific strain of avian influenza virus that has spread from birds to humans in some countries. Health experts are concerned about H5N1 because the virus could mutate in a way that allows it to spread easily from person to person, increasing the risk of a pandemic.

Q How likely is it that pandemic flu will spread to the U.S.?

A. Health agencies are always on the lookout for the first signs of a flu pandemic, and will work to try to contain it. But once a flu pandemic affects other countries, it will most certainly reach the United States.

Q Who will be affected by pandemic flu?

A. Few people will have a natural immunity to pandemic flu, so most of the population is at risk. It will likely impact people of all ages, backgrounds and locations.

Q Is there a vaccine for pandemic flu?

A. Not at this time. Because viruses change over time, it is difficult to produce a vaccine before the pandemic emerges in humans. Vaccine production is a complicated and lengthy process that can take several months.

Q How long will a pandemic last?

A. Predictions are difficult, but a flu pandemics may come in two or more waves several months apart, and each wave might last six to eight weeks in a particular location. In the 1957 pandemic, the second wave began three months after the first wave, but in 1968 the second wave began 12 months after the first.

Q What makes a pandemic different from other disasters?

A. Unlike other disasters, a flu pandemic is an infectious disease that does not damage homes, utilities, buildings and other structures. However, if the people who keep utilities and businesses running are unable to report to work, daily life will be disrupted.

Local Public Health Agencies in Greater Kansas City

Cass County

300 S. Main St., Harrisonville, MO 64701
Phone: 816-380-8425 • Fax: 816-380-8450

Clay County

800 Haines Dr., Liberty, MO 64068
Phone: 816-595-4200 • Fax: 816-595-4201
www.clayhealth.com

Independence

515 S. Liberty St., Independence, MO 64050
Phone: 816-325-7185 • Fax: 816-325-7098
www.indepmo.org/health

Jackson County

313 S. Liberty St., Independence, MO 64050
Phone: 816-404-6415 • Fax: 816-404-6429
www.jacohd.org

Johnson County

11875 S. Sunset Dr., Suite 300, Olathe, KS 66061
Phone: 913-894-2525 • Fax: 913-477-8048
6000 Lamar, Mission, KS 66202
Phone: 913-826-1200 • Fax: 913-826-1210
health.jocogov.org

Kansas City, Mo.

2400 Troost Ave., Kansas City, MO 64108
Phone: 816-513-6252 • Fax: 816-513-6293
www.kcmo.org/health

Leavenworth County

500 Eisenhower Rd., Suite 101
Leavenworth, KS 66048
Phone: 913-250-2000 • Fax: 913-250-2039
www.leavenworthcounty.org/hd

Platte County

212 Marshall Rd., Platte City, MO 64079
Phone: 816-858-2412 • Fax: 816-858-2087
www.plattecountyhealthdept.com

Ray County

820 E. Lexington St., Richmond, MO 64085
Phone: 816-776-5413 • Fax: 816-776-2441

Unified Government of Wyandotte County/Kansas City, Kan.

619 Ann Ave., Kansas City, KS 66101
Phone: 913-573-6704 • Fax: 913-321-7932
<http://www.wycokck.org>

**For more information about what you can
do to prepare for pandemic flu, contact your
local public health department.**