

Seasonal Flu, Bird Flu & Pandemic Influenza

The seasonal flu that people in your community experience every year is *not* pandemic flu or bird flu, but it can still be life-threatening for some people. The Vermont Department of Health recommends an annual flu shot – especially for anyone at risk of serious complications or death from the flu, their close contacts, and health care workers.

What is Influenza (the Flu)?

Influenza – the flu – is a contagious respiratory illness caused by influenza virus. There are two main types of influenza virus, A and B, and there are many different strains. The seasonal outbreaks of flu that we expect each year are caused by strains of flu virus similar to those of past years. Some people may have built up immunity, and there is also a vaccine for each year's flu season. Still, the flu can cause mild to severe illness and is responsible for about 36,000 deaths each year in the U.S., mostly among people age 65 or older.

In Vermont, the annual flu season usually starts in November or December, peaks in January, and may continue through the following April.

What is Avian Influenza (Bird Flu)?

Bird flu is an infection that is caused by avian (bird) flu viruses. There are many strains of avian influenza viruses that occur naturally among birds. One of these strains, H5N1, can make birds seriously ill and die. This is the bird flu that is killing birds in Asia and beyond. Sometimes a strain of bird flu can make people or other animals very sick or die.

As of March 2006, this H5N1 strain has sickened more than 175 people in Asia and Europe who came into direct or close contact with the sick birds, and about half of those people have died. Public health experts are concerned that if this strain changes and is easily spread from person to person, it could cause a pandemic.

What is Pandemic Influenza?

An influenza pandemic is a global outbreak of disease that happens when three conditions are met: 1) a new – or *novel* – influenza A virus emerges and infects people; 2) it causes severe illness; and 3) it spreads easily from person to person. History shows that influenza pandemics usually spread quickly around the world, resulting in an unusually high number of illnesses and deaths for two to three years. Such pandemics occurred in 1918, 1957 and 1968. The 1918 pandemic was especially severe, killing at least 500,000 people in the U.S. and up to 40 million worldwide.

The current outbreak of bird flu is an example of an influenza type A strain that is causing illness in birds and some humans, but is *not* a pandemic. There is no evidence that it can easily spread person to person. At this time, there is no pandemic influenza in the world, but public health experts and governments worldwide are preparing now for the next pandemic.

Will there be a pandemic? Will bird flu hit the U.S. this year?

It is impossible to know whether the bird flu will cause a human pandemic. As of March 2006, avian influenza H5N1 (the scientific name of the bird flu strain that is of concern right now) is killing birds overseas. It has also killed some people who came in contact with the sick birds. Influenza viruses can change, and the change can make the virus more or less of a threat to people.

Right now, there is no known H5N1 virus in birds or humans in North America. If the virus changes so that it can easily spread from sick people to healthy people, then it becomes a very serious public health threat. Public health experts around the world are on high alert, and will know if the H5N1 virus changes in a way that it becomes easily spread from person-to-person. If this happens, you will hear about it in the news and from the Vermont Department of Health.

It's difficult to predict when the next influenza pandemic will occur or how severe it will be. There have been three pandemics in the past century – in 1918, 1957, and 1968. The 1918 pandemic was extremely severe.

Does the annual flu shot protect against pandemic flu or bird flu?

No. Current flu vaccines will *not* protect against a new pandemic strain of influenza virus. Because it takes months to develop and distribute vaccine for a new strain, a vaccine probably would not be available in the early stages of a pandemic. If there is a flu pandemic, U.S. and state governments will work with partner groups to guide the use of limited vaccine supplies.

Is it safe to eat chicken, turkey or eggs?

There is no evidence that properly cooked poultry or eggs can be a source of infection for bird flu. Care should always be taken when handling any raw meat – including wild or domesticated birds – to avoid spreading germs. Wash hands and surfaces before and after preparing foods, cook meat and eggs thoroughly, and don't use the same utensils or surfaces used to prepare raw meat or eggs with cooked meat, eggs or other foods. For more information about bird flu and food safety, check website resources at pandemicflu.gov.

What can I do to keep from getting or spreading the flu?

Influenza viruses spread easily. Wash your hands often and well, cover your cough, stay home when you're sick, and teach your children to do the same. If you are considering travel overseas, first check the Centers for Disease Control & Prevention information for travelers at pandemicflu.gov. Avoid live meat/bird markets anywhere. For more information about how to prevent, recognize, and treat the flu – and to find out what Vermont is doing to prepare for pandemic influenza, check our website at healthvermont.gov.

What can I do now to prepare in case there is a pandemic?

It makes good sense to be prepared for *any* hazard. Vermont's Office of Emergency Management offers a *Family Emergency Preparedness Workbook* at dps.state.vt.us/vem. If pandemic influenza came to Vermont, schools and businesses could be closed. Plan ahead for situations in which you might have to take care of yourself and your family without leaving home. Think about essential supplies like food and medicine. The more you know, the more you can help your family and your community to prepare.

For much more information about pandemic flu, and to find out more about what individuals, families, communities, schools and businesses can do to prepare, check pandemicflu.gov often.

Updated March 30, 2006