

# 'Bird Flu' **FACT SHEET**

*"Most experts believe that it is not a question of whether there will be another severe influenza pandemic, but when"*  
(Chief Medical Officer, 2002)

## **What is 'Pandemic influenza' and what makes it different from 'ordinary' flu?**

Pandemic influenza is different from 'ordinary' seasonal flu, which for most people is an unpleasant illness, but runs its natural course (sometimes referred to as 'self-limiting') and is not life-endangering. Pandemic flu can occur when a new influenza virus emerges which is markedly different from recently circulating strains and to which humans have little or no immunity. Because of this lack of immunity the virus is able to :

- Infect more humans over a large geographical area
- Spread rapidly and efficiently from person to person
- Cause clinical illness in a proportion of those infected

It is easily passed from person to person when an infected person talks, coughs or sneezes. It can also spread through hand/face contact after touching anything that may become contaminated with the virus. Illness develops a few days (average 2-3) after being infected. Everyone is susceptible, although only about a quarter of the population are expected to become ill. Another 25% may catch the infection without any symptoms.

## **Is 'bird' flu the same as pandemic flu?**

No. They are different things. Bird flu is properly called 'Avian Influenza'.

## **What is Avian Influenza (AI)?**

A highly contagious viral infection of birds. It is contained in faeces and secretions, spreads easily from bird to bird and can also affect chickens, pigs, tigers and cats.

## **Can AI infect humans?**

The recent spread of type A H5N1 from birds to humans is a concern. AI was first reported to cross-infect humans in Hong Kong in 1997, when 1.5 million birds were killed and 6 of the 18 infected humans died; 17 of those affected had touched infected birds. The existing strain of the virus cannot transmit from person to person, but as the virus mutates this might happen causing a 'pandemic'.

## **How can AI be avoided?**

As it stands now, contact with wild birds and their droppings should be avoided; do not handle infected tame birds; wash hands if you touch something that might have come into contact with an infected bird.

## **What is the likelihood of a Bird Flu Pandemic?**

Most, but not all, of the major outbreaks recently reported in Asia have been caused by the highly pathogenic H5N1 strain. There is mounting evidence that this strain has a unique capacity to jump the species barrier and cause severe disease, with high mortality in humans.

Gene swapping inside the human body can give rise to a completely new subtype of the influenza virus to which few, if any, humans would have natural immunity. Moreover, existing vaccines would not be effective against a completely new flu virus.

When the new virus contains sufficient human genes, transmission directly from one person to another (instead of from birds to humans only) would occur. At this stage, the conditions for the start of a new influenza pandemic will have been met, resulting in the spread of the virus worldwide. Everyone is at risk and a vaccine can only be developed once the virus has been identified.

### ***Previous pandemics***

The worst influenza pandemic in recent history was that of 1918–1919, when a completely new influenza (Spanish flu) virus subtype emerged and spread around the globe in approximately 4-6 months. Several waves of infection occurred over 2 years, killing very large numbers of the population.

### ***What are the lessons from previous outbreaks?***

The key lesson is that influenza is unpredictable; every outbreak is different. It can:

- Occur at any time of year – not always in winter
- Exhibit variations in mortality rates, leading to uncertainty as to who will be affected
- Present us with a rapid surge of cases in a short period of time
- Occur in waves

### ***What is Influenza?***

Influenza is an acute **infection of the respiratory tract** by an influenza virus. It is **highly contagious** and can spread rapidly from person to person

Symptoms are of sudden onset and include:

Fever, headache, aching muscles, diarrhoea and severe weakness as well as respiratory problems, such as coughing, runny nose, chest pains and sore throat.

### ***How is it spread?***

Influenza is transmitted through:

**Breathing** in droplets containing the virus from an infected person talking, coughing or sneezing

**Touching** an infected person or a surface contaminated with the virus and then touching your own, or someone else's face.

### ***Social impact***

The likely proportion of the population to become ill cannot be calculated until the virus emerges. However, the best scenario expected is 25% of the population falling ill, and at worst, 50% will fall ill. Cases are expected to appear in a number of waves, each lasting around 15 weeks and there could be a significant number of deaths.

The estimated effect on business with 25% of the population falling ill:

- A large organisation could expect 7% of employees to take time off
- A small organisation could expect 14% of employees to take time off

## **How can PHS Direct help?**

***"The old adage, 'forewarned is forearmed', has particular resonance as we face this potential risk to global public health. The timing and the precise impact of another flu pandemic may not be clear but by preparing for every eventuality now, before it occurs, we stand the best chance of reducing its impact."  
(Sir Liam Donaldson, Chief Medical Officer)***

With the characteristic swift appearance of flu outbreaks, it is necessary to have precautions in place before the emergence of the virus. This includes:

- Assessing your own situation
- Informing staff of advice and precautions
- Reducing spread of infection by enforcing these procedures and providing the relevant products and equipment
- Employing measures to manage for several weeks – stock up on supplies
- Identifying essential positions
- Looking up and down the supply chain to ensure that customers and suppliers will not be adversely affected.

**PHS Direct** can help by supplying the products necessary to minimise the effect of bird flu on you, your staff and their families. We have undertaken an independent search of products available in the market place and selected only those products that we believe will provide the right level of effective protection. There are two main methods of protection:

### **1. Barrier products**

The Department of Health states that masks "will provide a physical barrier and minimize contamination of facial mucosa by large particle droplets, one of the principal ways influenza is transmitted."

- **Masks : EN149:2001 FFP3 disposable particulate respirators, offering the highest possible protection**
- Disposable plastic aprons, gloves, overshoes

### **2. Removal products**

The Chief Medical Officer has stated that, "clean hands are the best defence against the threatened flu pandemic".

- **'Handsan' alcohol based hand sanitiser / skin disinfectant**
- **'Oxivir' cleaner and disinfectant spray for surfaces**

***For further information on these products and our full range of washroom and workplace consumables, call PHS Direct on 01827 255500 or email [direct@phs.co.uk](mailto:direct@phs.co.uk).***

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**Tel: 01827 255500**  
**Fax: 01827 259997**  
**Email: [direct@phs.co.uk](mailto:direct@phs.co.uk)**  
**Web: [www.phs.co.uk/direct](http://www.phs.co.uk/direct)**

