

# Facts:

*from the Colorado Department of Public Health and Environment*



## Pandemic Influenza: Questions and Answers

### What is pandemic flu?

A pandemic of influenza, or flu, occurs when a new flu virus rapidly spreads from human-to-human and country-to-country around the world. A new virus can spread rapidly because most people are not immune to it.

Pandemics are not just particularly bad flu seasons. In fact, they are not seasonal at all; they can happen any time of year.

There is no pandemic flu anywhere in the world at this time.

### What is the difference between a pandemic and an epidemic?

An epidemic is an outbreak of a disease that occurs in one or several limited areas, like a city, state, or country. Once the disease spreads beyond the borders of several countries and affects many countries across the globe, it is called a pandemic. In the last century, several pandemics of influenza occurred – the biggest one in 1918. During that pandemic, at least 500,000 Americans died. There were as many as 20-50 million deaths worldwide.

### What is avian flu?

An influenza virus strain that infects birds is called avian influenza or bird flu. These flu viruses occur naturally among wild birds.

Usually avian flu viruses only infect birds. When an outbreak occurs, it can have a very serious impact on poultry flocks. An ongoing outbreak of avian flu in several countries has resulted in the killing of millions of chickens and other domestic birds to control the spread of avian flu.

### Why should I be concerned about a virus that infects birds?

The strain of avian flu causing disease in poultry, H5N1, is troubling for several reasons:

- The H5N1 virus is a highly pathogenic strain, which means it makes birds very sick or kills them.
- This flu strain rarely spreads from birds to people. So far, the H5N1 virus does not spread easily from person-to-person.
- Whenever an avian flu strain infects people, there is a chance that the virus could mutate, or change, to a new flu virus that spreads easily from person-to-person and causes serious illness.
- Infections with new human flu strains cannot be prevented by the flu vaccine that people get each year. Making a safe vaccine that can prevent infection with a new human virus will take several months.
- Because the virus can't be controlled easily, it could spread rapidly around the world and cause a pandemic.

### Is there a vaccine or treatment for avian flu?

A vaccine for the H5N1 avian flu is being developed. It is not available for use at this time.

The federal government is actively pursuing a vaccine development and production program to help with the public health response if a pandemic ever emerges. This will take some time to be completed.

There are antiviral medications that can be used to reduce the severity of

human flu. These medicines also may be effective in treating the current H5N1 avian flu. However, there are limited supplies of these antiviral medications, and their effectiveness in fighting pandemic flu is uncertain.

Buying and storing these medications for personal use is strongly discouraged. If antiviral medicines are overused or used incorrectly, the flu virus could become resistant to these medications, making them less effective. The limited supply of antivirals is needed for those who may have life-threatening seasonal flu.

### What is the state health department doing to prepare for pandemic flu?

If there is a widespread flu outbreak, Colorado and every other state in the country will respond with some new procedures, and many standard, time-tested disease control methods.

- The state's Department of Public Health and Environment and local health agencies across the state monitor influenza in our communities by working with doctors, hospitals, laboratories, and nursing homes to identify unusual numbers of people with flu-like illnesses.
- The state laboratory checks samples from patients with flu-like illnesses to help identify which flu viruses are circulating in our state.
- The Department of Public Health and Environment and your local public health agency work together to plan for public health emergencies. Staff practice the procedures in the plans to better prepare for disease outbreaks.

## Getting ready for pandemic influenza

A pandemic is caused by a strain of virus that is **new** – no one would be immune and it would be highly contagious. During a pandemic, you might be advised to stay home for a period of time to reduce the spread of the disease. Prepare yourself and your family with this checklist that could be helpful for any emergency. More information on home preparedness is available from Ready Colorado at [www.readycolorado.com](http://www.readycolorado.com).

### Home preparedness checklist

These particular items are especially important if you cannot leave your home and people cannot enter.

- Food and water:** Have a supply of canned and dried food and drinking water on hand – enough for several days or even weeks. Although basic utilities like electricity and water should remain on, there may be disruptions in some services. Grocery stores may not have enough staff to remain open.
- Items for personal comfort:** You may want to have extra items on hand to make your time at home more comfortable like, soap, shampoo, toothpaste, toilet paper, cleaning supplies, and activities for children.
- Cash:** Make certain to have some cash on hand. If necessary, you may be able to have items delivered to your door.
- Pets:** Make certain you have enough food and water for your pets, and other necessities like extra litter.
- Phone:** If there are disruptions to power, you will need to have a phone that does not run on power from an electrical outlet, such as a standard “wired” phone. Cordless phones will not operate when the power is out. Cellular phones still may be in service.
- Medications and equipment:** If you must take medications on a regular basis, be certain to have enough of a supply to last for several days.
- Large trash bags:** Garbage service may be disrupted or postponed for many days. Have bags on hand to store garbage safely.
- Family emergency plan:** Talk to your family about emergency plans. Make certain you have a plan to check in with elderly parents and friends; that children know who to contact in an emergency; and that you know your family’s medical histories, social security numbers, and other basic information.
- Personal hygiene:** Start now to teach your family and practice good hygiene.
  - Wash your hands frequently. If you can’t wash, use alcohol-based hand rubs.
  - Show your children how to “cover your cough” by coughing and sneezing into your sleeve instead of your hands.
  - Stay home when you are sick and keep the children home from school.

## Reliable sources of information

### Colorado HELP hotline

877-462-2911 (toll-free)  
M-F 7 a.m. – 11 p.m.; S-S 9:30 a.m. – 8 p.m.

### Colorado Department of Public Health and Environment

[www.cdphe.state.co.us](http://www.cdphe.state.co.us)  
303-692-2700

### Ready Colorado

800-639-READY (7323)  
[www.readycolorado.com](http://www.readycolorado.com)

### Centers for Disease Control and Prevention

[www.cdc.gov/flu](http://www.cdc.gov/flu)  
800-CDC-INFO (800-232-4636)  
888-232-6348 (TTY)  
[cdcinfo@cdc.gov](mailto:cdcinfo@cdc.gov)

### U.S. Department of Health and Human Services

[www.pandemicflu.gov](http://www.pandemicflu.gov)

### Colorado Influenza and Pneumococcal Alert Coalition

[www.immunizecolorado.com](http://www.immunizecolorado.com)  
303-692-2332 (business)  
888-692-0269 or 303-692-2633 (clinics)



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