



# Pandemic Flu

## What is pandemic flu?

A pandemic is a world-wide disease outbreak. An influenza pandemic happens when a new influenza virus appears to which people have little to no immunity, begins to cause serious illness and then spreads easily person-to-person worldwide.

## Have there been flu pandemics before?

There were 3 pandemics of the flu in the 20<sup>th</sup> Century:

- The 1918 flu pandemic caused at least 500,000 U.S. deaths and up to 40 million deaths worldwide.
- The 1957 flu pandemic caused at least 70,000 U.S. deaths and 1 – 2 million deaths worldwide.
- The 1968 flu pandemic caused about 34,000 U.S. deaths and 700,000 deaths worldwide.

## What are some problems we see with a pandemic flu?

We expect it to spread quickly around the world. It is likely that there will be no one immune to the illness. Countries may, by taking steps such as restricting travel, closing borders, delay the arrival of the virus, but cannot stop it.

Because there will be little to no immunity to a pandemic flu, infection and illness rates will soar. A very large number of people will need medical care. Many countries do not have enough staff, equipment, hospitals or medicine to handle the large number of people who suddenly become sick. Depending on how fast the virus spreads, how many people are effected, personal characteristics such as age and health of those people before they were infected, and how prepared the hospitals, cities, counties and states are, the death rate will probably be high.

Travel bans, school and business closings, and event cancellation could have a major impact on communities and people. People staying home to take care of sick family members or because they are afraid of being infected can cause a major problem with worker absenteeism.

## What can be done to prevent a flu pandemic?

Education and outreach are critical to preparing for a pandemic. Understanding what a pandemic is, what needs to be done at all levels to prepare for pandemic influenza, and what could happen during a pandemic flu helps us make informed decisions both as individuals and as a nation. For more information see our fact sheet on “Pandemic Flu—What You Can Do” or visit [www.pandemicflu.gov](http://www.pandemicflu.gov)

Information based on fact sheets from the United States Department of Health and Human Services.