

PANDEMIC INFLUENZA – FREQUENTLY ASKED QUESTIONS

What is Pandemic Influenza?

Pandemic flu is a term used to describe a worldwide epidemic of influenza. A pandemic occurs when a new influenza virus appears against which the human population has little or no immunity.

Historically, pandemics have occurred every 30-40 years. In the 20th century, there were pandemics in 1918, 1957 and 1968. Though nobody knows exactly when the next pandemic will occur, experts agree that another pandemic is overdue.

What is the difference between the flu and pandemic influenza?

The flu is another name for influenza, a serious respiratory infection caused by the influenza virus. What is commonly referred to as the flu is seasonal or “annual” influenza, which occurs each year during the winter months. Most people recover from seasonal influenza within one to two weeks and do not require medical treatment. Most deaths from the flu occur in high risk groups, including seniors, very young children and people with existing medical conditions and/or compromised immune systems.

Pandemic influenza is likely to cause similar symptoms but will be more severe because no one will have been exposed to this particular virus and therefore will not have immunity. Many more people are affected by pandemic influenza than by seasonal flu, and people of all age groups may be at risk for serious complications.

What are the symptoms of influenza?

The flu virus infects the respiratory tract (nose, throat, lungs), usually starts suddenly and *may* include fever, muscle pain and weakness, headache, tiredness, dry cough, sore throat, and runny or stuffy nose. In young children, diarrhea and vomiting may be present.

How is it spread?

Flu germs spread when infected people cough and sneeze. The germs also spread on unwashed hands or contaminated objects such as doorknobs, eating utensils, and toys. The virus lives longer in cool dry places, from 24 to 48 hours on hard non-porous surfaces, 8 to 12 hours on cloth/paper/tissue, and 5 minutes on unwashed hands.

Is there a vaccine or medicine available?

Because a pandemic is caused by a new virus, there is no vaccine currently available. Once a pandemic virus has been detected, it will take several months to develop, test, manufacture and distribute a new vaccine.

Antiviral drugs, if taken shortly after getting sick (within 48 hours), can reduce influenza symptoms, shorten the length of illness and reduce the risk of serious complications. The federal and provincial governments are purchasing and storing a limited supply of these drugs and will determine who is to receive them.

Is there anything I can do to protect my family and myself?

Yes. You can reduce the risk to yourself and those around you by getting the flu shot, washing your hands frequently and properly, staying home when you are sick, covering your mouth and nose when you sneeze and cough, not sharing personal items, and maintaining a healthy lifestyle.

What is York Region doing to prepare in the event of a pandemic?

York Region is working with various levels of governments, local organizations, and key decision makers to develop plans and practices that will, to the greatest degree possible, protect the health of York Region residents.

Where can I get more information?

For information on this or other health-related questions, contact York Region Health Services *Health Connection* at 1-800-361-5653 or visit www.york.ca.