

9. Pandemic Influenza – What You Need To Know – Key Facts

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Headline – Key Facts on Pandemic Flu

The words bird flu and pandemic seem to have become synonymous with each other in recent months. As more countries join the list of those being invaded by the H1N1 bird flu virus it's no wonder there's a lot of talk about it. But what exactly is a pandemic influenza and what does that mean to the world population?

The 411 on Pandemic Flu

First, a pandemic influenza means a virus outbreak of global proportions – essentially no area of the world is 'safe' from the virus. The larger problem (as if a global disease wasn't enough) is the fact that when pandemic flu strikes, it inflicts people who have little or no immunity to it. More often than not, we lack effective vaccines to fight it. To compound the problem even further, the virus spreads rapidly, person-to-person, causing serious illness, and even death, in very short time span.

A History of Pandemic Flu

In the last century the world has experienced three main pandemic influenzas. Here they are separated by year and death toll:

- 1918-1919 - 500,000+ in the US; 40,000,000+ worldwide
- 1957-1958 - 70,000+ in the US; 1-2,000,000 worldwide
- 1968-1969 - 34,000+ in the US; 700,000+ worldwide

You'll notice how the numbers drop as the years progressed – we as a worldwide population began to better defend ourselves against disease. Still they are frightening figures nonetheless. In the US alone nearly a half million people died in 1918-1919. But also note that these deaths all took place within just a year – one single year. In fact, pandemic flu strikes so quickly that a majority of the people who died did so within a matter of weeks once the pandemic was at its height. And the time it takes for a pandemic to reach its height? In most of these cases, it was only 6-8 weeks from the onset of the virus.

Why Not Make a Fast Drug That Fights Pandemic Flu?

That would be ideal but unrealistic. Another fact to consider is that it's difficult for the world health organizations to predict when the next influenza pandemic will occur, what strain of influenza it will be or how severe it will infect the world. This is why bird flu, strain H1N1, has many people up in arms. At the moment we have no proven vaccine

against it and the onset of death happens so swiftly to people that they can't receive proper medical treatment. Bird flu mimics the 'common flu' so closely that often it isn't until people experience acute respiratory distress or viral pneumonia that testing and diagnosis is done to be certain. Usually by that point, it's much harder for a patient to recover, and that's if they can recover at all. For nearly half of people that get bird flu the end result is death.

Right now the world medical community is betting that the next pandemic that could strike the global population will be the bird flu strain H1N1, but no one knows for certain. However, one thing we do know is that we have limited medication on hand when compared to the world population. Plus, the only vaccine we have is still in the testing stages. For many critics they believe it's a race against the clock to when a vaccine can be secured to work and dispensing it before the world has another pandemic flu on its hands. So the question remains, will we run out of time?

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