

Seasonal, Avian, and Pandemic Flu: What's the Same, What's Different?

We all know about seasonal influenza, or flu—that “bug” that brings aches, pains, coughing, and fever to millions of people around the world every winter. But with all the news today predicting a dangerous new flu, called pandemic flu, there is understandable confusion. What is pandemic flu? How is pandemic flu different from seasonal flu? What's the difference between a pandemic and an epidemic?

This Frequently Asked Questions overview is intended to help you understand the differences and similarities among the different types of flu.

Frequently Asked Questions

Q. What is flu?

A. Flu is a contagious infection caused by a virus. It usually affects the respiratory system, including the nose, throat, and lungs. Most people recover from seasonal flu—the kind that comes every year—within two weeks. However, some people develop more serious, life-threatening complications such as pneumonia.

Q. How does flu spread?

A. Flu generally spreads when an infected person coughs or sneezes, sending infectious droplets of moisture into the air for others to breathe. A person also can catch the flu by touching a surface where those droplets have fallen—for example, a public telephone or a doorknob—or by shaking hands with others who carry the infected droplets on their hands.

Q. What's the difference between an epidemic and a pandemic?

A. An epidemic takes place when an infection spreads quickly at one time within a population or area. A pandemic can quickly spread all over the world, infect far greater numbers of people, and could take a much longer time to run its course—perhaps months, or even years.

Q. How do seasonal flu, pandemic flu, and avian flu compare with one another?

A. Seasonal flu follows predictable patterns; it comes every year, usually in winter. Seasonal flu symptoms can range from mild to severe, and in some cases they cause death. In fact, every year, about 36,000 people in the U.S. die from flu-related complications.

Although pandemic flu is rarer—it has happened only three times in the past century—it is far more serious. Experts predict that a new pandemic flu outbreak could infect millions of people around the world and kill a large percentage of those infected. The Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) estimates that even a “medium-level” pandemic could cause 89,000 to 207,000 deaths in the U.S.¹

¹ Centers for Disease Control and Prevention. *Pandemic Flu: Key Facts*. Updated 10/17/2005. <http://www.cdc.gov/flu/pandemic/keyfacts.htm>

Avian flu is a dangerous virus with the potential to become a pandemic. The virus, which scientists have named H5N-1, first appeared in Hong Kong in 1997. Most cases of avian flu have resulted from close human contact with infected poultry such as chickens, turkeys, or ducks. Of the few cases involving the H5N-1 virus that have crossed from bird to humans, this virus has caused the greatest number of reported cases of severe disease and death in humans. In fact, about half of all people known to have contracted avian flu have died from it.

To date, there have been only a few reports of one infected person infecting another person. Scientists are worried, however, that the virus may change and mutate, become highly contagious, and spread easily from person to person. No one can predict when or if this will happen.

SEASONAL VS. PANDEMIC FLU		
US average	SEASONAL ²	PANDEMIC (estimate for future medium-level outbreak) ³
Percentage of people in US contracting flu every year	5% to 20% of US population	15%-35% of US population (estimated projection)
Number of hospitalizations from flu-related complications in 2004-5 flu season	200,000	734,000 (estimated projection)
Average number of deaths from flu-related complications in US each year	36,000	89,000-207,000 (estimated projection)

Q. Why is pandemic flu so much more dangerous than seasonal flu?

A. Our health care system is generally able to handle seasonal flu, and current vaccines are effective in controlling it. Most adults build up some immunity against seasonal flu over the years, lowering their risk for serious flu-related problems. Pandemic flu, on the other hand, would come from a new strain of virus not seen before. People would have no immunity against this new virus.

Because there is no vaccine for preventing pandemic flu at this time, scientists believe pandemic flu could be far more dangerous than seasonal flu, especially as it affects the respiratory system.

Faced with a huge surge in the numbers of infected patients needing care, health care facilities could have difficulty meeting patient needs. Most facilities would experience staff shortages due to illness from pandemic flu, and most would lack space for isolating large numbers of infected patients.

² Centers for Disease Control and Prevention. *Influenza Q&A: The Disease*. Updated 9/22/2004. <http://www.cdc.gov/flu/about/qa/disease.htm>

³ Centers for Disease Control and Prevention: Key Facts about Pandemic Influenza. Updated 10/17/2005. <http://www.cdc.gov/flu/pandemic/keyfacts.htm>

Q. Can flu be prevented?

A. Annual flu vaccinations can help prevent much of the illness and death related to seasonal influenza. That is because scientists usually have a good idea of the type of flu expected each year and can prepare vaccines to protect against it.

We do not yet have a vaccine that is known to be effective against a potential outbreak of pandemic flu. Experts believe that a pandemic flu will involve strains of virus not seen before. Therefore, pandemic flu will be harder to protect against.

Q. How do treatments for each type of flu differ?

A. Our healthcare system manages seasonal flu with programs to vaccinate the population against flu and with a number of antiviral medications for those who get the flu. With pandemic flu, many more people may become sick and require medical care. However, there may be no useful antiviral medication available for treating people with pandemic flu, or there may be only limited supplies.

Q. Who is most at risk for serious complications from flu?

A. For seasonal flu, the people most at risk are:

- Young children who have not yet built up any immunity to flu;
- Older people whose immune systems may have weakened over time; and
- People with various diseases and conditions such as diabetes, cancer, HIV, or those who have had organ transplants or chemotherapy treatments—or any health condition that weakens the immune system.

For pandemic flu, **everyone** is at risk. Health care workers and first responders would be at special risk due to exposure to large numbers of infected patients.

Q. How can I learn more about protecting myself, my patients, and my co-workers from flu and other infections?

A. Infection control is the best way to protect yourself, your coworkers, and your patients from flu and other infections.

- For details about standard infection control, see SEIU 1199NY's FAQ, "*Using Infection Control to Prevent the Spread of flu in Health Care Settings.*"
- For additional information about your union's response to influenza prevention and infection control, visit: www.seiu.org and www.1199seiu.org
- For additional information about flu and infection prevention, visit the CDC website: <http://www.cdc.gov/flu/>

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