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WHAT DO WE KNOW ABOUT INFLUENZA PANDEMICS?

A pandemic is an outbreak of a disease that affects a large number of people around the globe. Influenza pandemics occur when a highly aggressive virus emerges that can spread quickly around the world due to a lack of immunity against the new virus.

Historically, we know that a pandemic is a rare event, but when one does occur, it causes serious health problems, affects economies, and disrupts the daily lives of people and communities throughout the world.

Is there a risk that an influenza pandemic could occur?

Influenza pandemics have occurred in the past and are sure to happen in the future. Although we are certain that a pandemic will occur sometime, no one knows for sure when or where it will happen.

Countries around the world have been on alert since 2003, when a new virus known as H5N1 was identified as causing severe flu in many types of birds, including chickens. This animal virus is not well adapted to humans and to date has only infected around 250 people who live in close proximity to infected poultry. Even so, we know that the avian H5N1 virus causes severe

respiratory infections in humans and that nature has given the virus the ability to change frequently. If the avian H5N1 virus gains the ability to easily infect and transmit between humans, the possibility of a global pandemic being unleashed would arise.



Countries are strengthening their preparedness plans to confront future pandemics

What have we learned from past pandemics?

In the past century, three influenza pandemics occurred, in 1918, 1957, and 1968. Despite a difference in terms of impact, all three pandemics showed common patterns that should be kept in mind when planning for future pandemics:

- 1 Influenza pandemics cause more illness than regular flu. In the case of a flu pandemic, everyone would be at risk since no one would have prior immunity against a new virus.
- 2 Pandemics can cause great social disruption. A pandemic virus spreads quickly throughout the world, infecting lots of people in a short period of time. Based on experiences from previous pandemics, many workers become ill, including police, firefighters, health personnel, business owners, drivers, teachers and students, etc., which in turn affects the provision of basic services.
- 3 Community organization can make a difference. Communities that are better prepared will be able to minimize the impact of and recover more quickly from a possible influenza pandemic, as well as from any other type of large scale emergency.

We can minimize the impact of a pandemic on health, the economy, and society as a whole

What can we do at the community level?

The world is more prepared than ever to confront the threat of a new influenza pandemic. However, no government in any country will be able to meet all of the needs that will arise during a pandemic. Therefore, every country, community, and family must be informed and prepared.

e-FluINFO will help you identify effective measures that can be taken at the community level to reduce human transmission of an influenza virus and reduce the impact of the next influenza pandemic.

To date, no case of avian flu caused by the highly pathogenic H5N1 virus has been detected in the Americas

The Pan American Health Organization (PAHO) recommends that all countries and communities of the Americas prepare themselves for a possible flu pandemic

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For questions or comments, e-mail: FluInfo@paho.org or contact the Ministry of Health in your country

