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What Is an Influenza Pandemic?

A pandemic is a global disease outbreak. An influenza pandemic occurs when a new influenza A virus emerges for which there is little or no immunity in the human population, begins to cause serious illness, and then spreads easily person-to-person worldwide.

Historically, the 20th century saw three pandemics of influenza:

- 1918 influenza pandemic caused at least 675,000 U.S. deaths and up to 50 million deaths worldwide.
- 1957 influenza pandemic caused at least 70,000 U.S. deaths and 1-2 million deaths worldwide.
- 1968 influenza pandemic caused about 34,000 U.S. deaths and 700,000 deaths worldwide.

Characteristics and challenges of a pandemic

Rapid Worldwide Spread

- When a pandemic influenza virus emerges, its global spread is considered inevitable.
- Preparedness activities should assume that the entire world population would be susceptible.
- Countries might, through measures such as border closures and travel restrictions, delay arrival of the virus, but cannot stop it.

Health Care Systems Overloaded

- Most people have little or no immunity to a pandemic virus. Infection and illness rates soar. A substantial percentage of the world's population will require some form of medical care.
- Nations unlikely to have the staff, facilities, equipment and hospital beds needed to cope with large numbers of people who suddenly fall ill.

- Death rates are high, largely determined by four factors: the number of people who become infected, the virulence of the virus, the underlying characteristics and vulnerability of affected populations, and the effectiveness of preventive measures.
- Past pandemics have spread globally in two and sometimes three waves.

Medical Supplies Inadequate

- The need for vaccine is likely to outstrip supply.
- The need for antiviral drugs is also likely to be inadequate early in a pandemic.
- A pandemic can create a shortage of hospital beds, ventilators and other supplies. Surge capacity at non-traditional sites such as schools may be created to cope with demand.
- Difficult decisions will need to be made regarding who gets antiviral drugs and vaccines.

Economic and Social Disruption

- Travel bans, closings of schools and businesses and cancellations of events could have major impact on communities and citizens.
- Care for sick family members and fear of exposure can result in significant worker absenteeism.
- Communications and information are critical components of pandemic response.

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 helps us make informed decisions both as individuals and as a nation. Should a pandemic occur the public must be able to depend on its government to provide scientifically sound public health information quickly, openly, and dependably. For additional information on pandemic influenza visit:

www.flu.gov.