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## FACTSHEET

May 14, 2009

Ministry of Healthy Living and Sport  
Ministry of Health Services

### PANDEMIC 101

#### 1) How is pandemic flu different from seasonal flu?

- Flu pandemics happen when a new kind of influenza virus that is able to spread easily from person to person appears, and spreads quickly around the world. Even if the pandemic flu isn't more severe than seasonal flu, because more people will likely be infected and since people have limited protection against the new virus, a pandemic flu will likely cause more illnesses and a larger number of deaths than the seasonal flu
- An estimated 400-800 people in British Columbia, 4,000-8,000 people in Canada die and about 500,000 people worldwide die of seasonal flu and/or pneumonia each year.

#### 2) Influenza pandemics have happened every ten to forty years for at least the last 500 years.

- There were three flu pandemics last century, the last in 1968. But even in the worst pandemic in recorded history (the Spanish Flu pandemic in 1918), 97 per cent of people who were ill, survived even without the use of antibiotics, antivirals or vaccines, as none had been developed at that time.
- No one can predict exactly when a pandemic will happen, but it may be soon. In fact, even if it only produces mild to moderate illnesses in people, the H1N1 flu virus could be declared a pandemic by the World Health Organization if enough countries are affected.
- This is why people and communities must prepare now, to ensure they are ready to respond when needed.

#### 3) How will B.C. know that a flu pandemic is coming?

- A flu pandemic will likely begin outside North America. A worldwide network of scientists, including scientists in Canada and B.C., closely tracks flu activity. This cooperation will help to identify a new flu virus that could cause a pandemic, as early as possible.
- This is what happened with the H1N1 flu virus (human swine flu) but, as it has not affected enough countries, it has not yet been declared a pandemic situation by the World Health Organization.

#### 4) What will happen in B.C.?

- Based on past pandemics, it will take no longer than six months from the start of a flu pandemic somewhere in the world until the time that same flu causes outbreaks in B.C. Because airline travel is much more common now than ever before, this timeline is proven to be much shorter as we saw with the H1N1 flu virus.

- B.C. has had an alert system in place for a long time, and it has been very effective in the past for identifying illnesses, such as Severe Acute Respiratory Syndrome (SARS). It includes asking health care workers across the province to report any new or unusual illness in travellers either coming or returning to B.C. This system will ensure early testing and provide early warning to health officials when the virus that causes pandemic flu has reached B.C. When a virus that can cause a flu pandemic has been found in B.C., the Provincial Health Officer will inform the public.
- The BC Pandemic Influenza Preparedness Plan and the plans of the local health authorities (available on their websites) lay out steps and ways that B.C. can prepare for a flu pandemic before it arrives, and respond to the pandemic once it is here. The Plan's key goals are to help communities and their resources to work together to reduce sickness and death, and give families and groups tips and ways to stay well and secure. Check [www.gov.bc.ca/swineflu](http://www.gov.bc.ca/swineflu) for more details.
- Unlike other natural disasters like tsunamis, floods or earthquakes, once a flu pandemic arrives, it could last for several months. It is most likely that a pandemic will strike hardest during the usual flu season, which is December to March. It is also likely that a pandemic will occur in several waves, with the second wave of illness occurring within six to nine months after the first. This means people need to be prepared to respond not only once, but several times.
- When a flu pandemic reaches B.C., it may make people sick in different parts of the province at different times. More people might get sick in one city than in another. There is no way to know for sure how many people will get sick or die in the next pandemic. If the H1N1 flu virus is declared as the next pandemic, so far it has resulted in a low mortality rate across the developed world.

#### **5) What can you expect where you live?**

- During a flu pandemic, more people will be sick at the same time than normal, and it will be harder for the health system to keep up. Based on United Kingdom models of illness rates during a pandemic, it is estimated that at its peak, 20 per cent of persons will be ill enough to be off work during any one week. Because more people will be sick, you might have to wait longer to see your doctor or get into a hospital. Because more people will be off work with the flu, there may be problems in other types of services, like garbage pick-up, bus service, and being able to buy food.
- There are plans in place to help people during a pandemic. For example, you can expect that:
  - The most needed medical services will still be provided;
  - Special clinics may be set up specifically to treat people with flu or flu-like illness; and
  - People with the worst symptoms and those who are most likely to get very sick from the flu will be cared for.

#### **6) How can you prepare?**

- Even though a flu pandemic cannot be prevented, the more you know and plan about a pandemic beforehand, the better you be able to deal with a pandemic if it occurs.

- The B.C. Ministries of Health Services and Healthy Living and Sport, the BC Centre for Disease Control and the regional health authorities are preparing now for a flu pandemic. They are working to make sure that medical professionals, essential service workers and the public are aware of the pandemic preparedness in the province. They are working to ensure that medical care, treatments and other social supports can be available as much as possible, as early as possible, before, during and after a pandemic.
- Everyone has a role to play in preparing for a pandemic. You can start by:
  - Learning as much as you can by reading information that is on government websites, watching the news and reading the newspaper. You can also check out your local health authority's website for the local pandemic plan.
  - Making sure you get a flu shot every year. This will help protect you from the winter flu season, but it will not protect you during a pandemic. What it will do is help develop the capacity of the vaccine maker and help them prepare for production of a pandemic vaccine.
  - If you are over 65 years or have a chronic health concern, ask your doctor about the pneumococcal vaccine, which can help protect against one complication of the flu – a commonly occurring bacterial pneumonia.
  - Learning how you can keep yourself and your family from getting sick if a flu pandemic comes to B.C. This means practicing basic hygiene techniques now, such as regular hand washing and covering your mouth with a tissue when sneezing and coughing.
  - Learning how you can take care of yourself and your family if you or they become sick.
  - Knowing who to call if you need medical help or health advice during a pandemic. This could be your family doctor, your local public health unit, HealthLink BC at 8-1-1, or others who provide you with medical care. During a pandemic, it may mean going to special flu clinics.
  - Talking to your employer and your local municipality and health authority about their pandemic preparedness plans.
  - Advance planning by all organizations and citizens, including you, will help reduce the number of people who get sick, or die, and the amount of social disruption caused during a pandemic.

You can call [HealthLink BC](#) at **8-1-1**, 24 hours a day/seven days a week to speak to a nurse if you have more questions or if feeling ill.