

# DENTON COUNTY HEALTH DEPARTMENT

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## Ten Things to Know About Pandemic Influenza

### **1. Pandemic (widespread) influenza is different from avian influenza (bird flu).**

Avian influenza (bird flu) is the name for a large group of different influenza viruses that usually affects birds. Sometimes these bird viruses can make pigs and humans sick; however, most avian influenza viruses do not make humans sick. Sometimes though, avian influenza viruses change and become able to easily make people sick. When this happens, there is an influenza pandemic happens. During an influenza pandemic, flu outbreaks happen all over the world. Right now there is an outbreak of avian influenza called H5N1 that is happening in Asia. It is possible that it will change into a kind of flu that can pass from human to human. Once this happens, it will no longer be a bird virus; it will be a human influenza virus.

### **2. Influenza pandemics have happened in the past.**

A pandemic happens when a new influenza virus makes people sick and starts spreading as easily as normal influenza -- by coughing and sneezing. Because the virus is new, our bodies cannot fight it off. This makes it likely that people who get sick will be sicker than they would be with normal influenza. An influenza pandemic does not happen very often, but it does happen. Three pandemics have happened in the past 100 years: "Spanish influenza" in 1918, "Asian influenza" in 1957, and "Hong Kong influenza" in 1968. The 1918 pandemic killed about 40-50 million people worldwide. It was one of the deadliest disease outbreaks in human history. The other two pandemics were not as bad, with about 2 million deaths in 1957 and 1 million deaths in 1968.

### **3. The world may see pandemic soon.**

Health professionals have been looking at a new and very severe avian influenza virus -- called the H5N1 strain -- for almost eight years. While it usually affects birds, the H5N1 strain infected some people in Hong Kong in 1997, 18 people got the disease, 6 of them died. Since mid-2003, this virus has caused the largest and worst spread of disease in chickens, turkeys, and ducks ever. In December 2003, some people started to get sick from the infected birds. Since then, over 100 humans have become sick in four Asian countries (Cambodia, Indonesia, Thailand, and Viet Nam), and more than half of these people have died. Most of these people were healthy children and young adults. Right now the virus does not jump easily from birds to humans or spread easily from human to human. If H5N1 changes to a form the spreads easily from humans to humans, like normal human influenza, a widespread outbreak could start.

### **4. All countries will be affected.**

If we have a new influenza virus that spreads easily from person to person, it will spread all over the world. To help stop or slow the spread of the virus, countries might close borders and stop travel. The past pandemics traveled worldwide in 6 to 9 months, even when most international travel was by ship. Because we have international air travel today, the virus could spread quicker, possibly reaching all continents in less than 3 months.

**5. Widespread illness will happen.**

Because people have never been sick with the virus, more people are expected to get sick than during normal flu season – people do not have immunity to fight off the illness. Health professionals think that most of the world’s population will need medical care. Few countries have the staff, facilities, equipment, and hospital beds needed to deal with large numbers of people getting sick at the same time.

**6. There will not be enough medical supplies.**

There will not be enough vaccine and antiviral drugs for everyone who needs it. These are the two most important medical treatments for lowering illness and deaths during a pandemic. Vaccine is the first line of defense to protect people, but right now there is not a vaccine. Health professionals are concerned that even when a vaccine is made there will not be enough for everyone.

**7. Some people will die.**

The number of people that could die is decided by four different things: the number of people who get sick, the strength of the virus, the type of people affected, and how well control measures work. No one can say how many people will die until the virus starts to make people sick.

**8. The financial and community impact will be big.**

Many people getting sick at one time will cause large numbers of people to be absent from work. This will be hard for the finances of the people and for the businesses. The biggest impact will happen when large numbers of people are absent from essential service jobs, such as power, transportation, and communication.

**9. Every country needs to be prepared.**

The World Health Organization (WHO) and the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) have recommended that everyone create a plan to prepare for pandemic influenza. The Texas Department of State Health Services and the Denton County Health Department have created pandemic influenza plans that can be used if needed.

**10. WHO will let the world know when there is a pandemic is beginning.**

WHO works closely with government and public health organizations so they can know when and if things change with the influenza virus.

**For More Information**

World Health Organization, [www.who.int](http://www.who.int)  
Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, [www.cdc.gov](http://www.cdc.gov)