

Background on Influenza

What is influenza?

Influenza, more commonly known as the flu, is a highly contagious respiratory illness caused by a virus.

What is a pandemic?

A pandemic is distinguished by its scope. It becomes a worldwide epidemic, or *pandemic*, when a disease spreads easily and rapidly through many countries and regions of the world and affects a large percentage of the population where it spreads.

What is H1N1 influenza?

H1N1 Flu Virus has been reported around the world, and the [World Health Organization \(WHO\)](#) has declared it a pandemic influenza virus. Swine influenza (sometimes called swine flu) is a strain of the influenza virus that usually affects pigs, but which may also make people sick.

H1N1 Flu Virus is a respiratory illness that causes symptoms similar to those of the regular human seasonal flu. The symptoms include fever, fatigue, lack of appetite, coughing and sore throat. Some people with H1N1 Flu Virus have also reported vomiting and diarrhea

How does a pandemic influenza start?

The viruses that cause influenza are constantly changing. A pandemic starts when a new strain of influenza virus emerges that is different from common strains of influenza. Because people have no immunity to the new virus, it can spread quickly and infect hundreds of thousands of people. Pandemic influenza strains often develop when an animal or bird virus mixes with a human virus to form a new virus.

What is the contagious period?

Influenza can be contagious for 24 to 48 hours before any symptoms arise and for five days after the onset of symptoms.

This means that you could spread the virus without knowing you are infected.

Phases of an Influenza Period

The World Health Organization has identified six phases of a pandemic influenza. These phases allow a step-wise approach to preparedness planning and response leading up to a declaration of the start of a pandemic. Canada and New Brunswick are using the WHO pandemic periods and phases.

Phase 1: Influenza viruses are circulating in animals, especially birds. No reports of animal viruses infecting humans.

Phase 2: Human infection by an animal influenza virus. Potential pandemic threat.

Phase 3: An animal or animal-human influenza virus has caused limited disease in people. Isolated human to human transmission may occur – but not widespread.

Phase 4: Verified human to human transmission of an animal or human-animal virus causing widespread or foregone conclusion.

Phase 5: Human to human spread of the virus is confirmed in at least two countries in one WHO region. It is likely that a pandemic is imminent. Time to finalize organization, communication, and implementation of planned mitigation strategies is short.

Phase 6: The Pandemic Phase. Community outbreaks in at least one country from a second WHO region – indicating “community-level” outbreaks. Risk of pandemic is considered much higher but not enough that a global pandemic is underway. The Director-General of the WHO makes the decision about an elevation of pandemic phases based on reports from countries of the impact of disease.