

Pandemic Flu

What You Need to Know

■ What is it?

Most of us already know what the flu is. When one of us gets it, it seems like just a matter of time before all of us get it. Usually, we get over it in a day or two.

What is different about Pandemic Flu? "Pandemic" means something that affects a lot of people, and maybe the entire world. Also, there are different kinds of flu bugs, and some can make you very sick.

When we talk about Pandemic Flu, that's what we worry about — one of the serious kinds that can make a lot of people very sick.

■ What is the danger?

Anyone can get the flu, but people with heart or lung problems or people who have breathing problems could have a very rough time with any flu. Different flus are given "HN" names. For example, a common flu is H2N2. But a flu called H5N1 causes very serious illness. With H5N1, more people get sick, they are sicker for a longer time, and more are at risk of death. We don't see this flu very often, but when we do, it is very dangerous indeed. When you hear the expression "bird flu," it usually means the H5N1 flu. Yes, birds can get the flu.

■ How do I protect myself?

If there is an outbreak of H5N1 flu, health authorities will let us know. There is no vaccine, but normal precautions will help:

- Cover your mouth when you cough or sneeze
- If you get sick, stay at home
- If you know someone who is sick, wash your hands frequently, and keep your hands away from your face, nose, mouth, and eyes
- Clean surfaces in the sick room with disinfecting products

Your local health department will explain if more extreme precautions are necessary.

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