

#### Frequently Asked Questions (updated 10/31/05):

- [What is flu?](#)
- [What causes flu?](#)
- [How is flu spread?](#)
- [How can I prevent catching the flu?](#)
- [If I get the flu, how can I keep from infecting others?](#)
- [What is a flu pandemic?](#)
- [What is the difference between seasonal and pandemic flu?](#)
- [How often do flu pandemics occur?](#)
- [What is avian or bird flu?](#)
- [Why do I hear so much on the News about avian \(bird\) flu?](#)
- [Why isn't there a vaccine for avian \(bird\) flu?](#)
- [Who is at risk for avian or bird flu?](#)
- [Are avian \(bird\) flu and flu pandemic the same thing?](#)
- [Will the seasonal "regular" flu shot protect from avian \(bird\)/pandemic flu?](#)
- [When will avian \(bird\) pandemic flu arrive in Pierce County?](#)
- [What about treatment for influenza, such as Tamiflu?](#)
- [During a flu pandemic, will Tamiflu be available?](#)
- [Should I get a prescription for Tamiflu now to store for the coming pandemic?](#)
- [What other resources will give me information about flu – Seasonal, Avian \(Bird\) or Pandemic?](#)

#### What is flu?

Flu, also called influenza, is a contagious disease of the lungs and airways. Flu symptoms usually include:

- Fever
- Headache
- Sore throat
- Body aches
- Cough
- Runny nose
- Stomach and intestinal discomfort
- Tiredness

Flu may be mild in some people, severe in others and causes death to about 36,000 people each year in the United States. Older people, young children and people with certain illnesses or chronic medical conditions are at higher risk for serious flu complications.

#### What causes flu?

A virus causes flu. A virus is a microscopic organism that lives and reproduces within a cell and causes a disease such as measles, mumps, whooping cough, hepatitis or chickenpox. Some viruses kill people, others just make people ill. Once a virus infects someone, there is no way to get rid of it. An antibiotic cannot kill a virus. Sometimes other kinds of medicines can help to lessen the symptoms.

## Avian (Bird) / Pandemic Influenza

Prevention is the key to keeping viruses from spreading to someone else. [Ways to prevent getting a flu virus.](#)

Researchers have identified three types of influenza viruses, named A, B, and C.

- Influenza A: can infect people, birds, pigs, horses, seals, whales and other animals. Wild birds are the natural hosts for these viruses.

There are subtypes of influenza A. Some subtypes cause illness in humans, and some cause illness in animals. Problems may occur when an influenza subtype virus that only infects animals expands its ability to infect humans. Since a person has no history of protection against the virus, the new subtype virus causes people to become very ill or die. See the information below about [Avian or Bird Flu](#) for an example of a subtype that is expected to move from infecting only birds to one that infects humans.

- Influenza B: found only in humans. There have been no recorded Influenza B pandemics in humans.
- Influenza C: causes mild illness in humans. There have been no recorded Influenza C pandemics in humans.

### How is flu spread?

Usually flu is spread from one person to another through droplets containing the flu virus. You can inhale a flu virus by breathing in droplets after someone sneezes or coughs. Or, if someone coughs or sneezes into her/his hand and then touches something like a doorknob or telephone receiver, the virus can live for several hours on those surfaces. If you touch those items, and then rub or your nose or eyes, you could carry the flu virus into your body.

Influenza is contagious from one day before someone feels symptoms of flu to about 5 days after that individual gets sick. During the contagious time, the virus is actively being shed from nose, throat and lungs.

### How can I prevent catching the flu?

#### 1. Get vaccinated.

Currently, two types of vaccinations occur. One is a flu shot. Injected material contains inactivated virus that your body reacts to by building defenses against that virus. This type of vaccine works effectively for people of all ages and medical conditions. Each year the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention sends medical providers a list of people who are at highest risk for complications from the flu and who should receive a flu shot. In general, anyone who wants a flu shot can get one.

The other is an effective nasal spray vaccine. This type, which uses live, weakened flu virus, can be used by healthy people between 5 and 49 years old who are not pregnant.

## Avian (Bird) / Pandemic Influenza

### 2. Wash your hands frequently.

Since viruses live on almost any surface for several hours, anything you touch could contain flu virus. Washing your hands throughout the day reduces the likelihood that you will carry a flu virus to your nose or mouth.

### 3. Avoid touching your nose, mouth, and eyes.

Even if you wash your hands, try to avoid touching any mucous membrane, such as your eyes, nose, or mouth, to prevent getting flu virus into your body.

### 4. Practice healthy habits

Keeping yourself healthy helps your body defend itself against viruses that make you ill. Healthy habits include getting plenty of rest; eating healthy foods such as fruits, vegetables and whole grains; exercising or including physical activity into your routine 4 to 6 days per week; and taking steps to reduce your stress, including relaxing every day.

## If I get the flu, how can I keep from infecting others?

### 1. Stay home from school, work or social events if you have a fever and respiratory symptoms.

If you or any of your family members are experiencing any flu symptoms, stay home. Flu symptoms include fever, headache, extreme tiredness, dry cough, sore throat, runny or stuffy nose and muscle aches. Nausea, vomiting and diarrhea may also occur, and are more common among children than adults.

### 2. Cover coughs and sneezes.

Always cover your nose and mouth when coughing or sneezing. Cover your mouth and nose with the inside of your elbow or a tissue. Avoid coughing or sneezing into your hand. If you use tissues to contain droplets or discharges from your nose and mouth immediately dispose in the garbage and wash your hands thoroughly. Remind others to do the same.

### 3. Most important of all, wash your hands with soap and water frequently and/or use hand sanitizers.

## What is a flu pandemic?

From the Greek words “pan,” meaning “all,” and “demos,” meaning “people,” a pandemic is a disease that affects a large number of people over a very wide area. In general, a flu pandemic means a worldwide outbreak of the disease.

Three conditions must be met to reach the flu pandemic category:

1. A new flu virus subtype happens.
2. The virus infects humans, causing serious illness.
3. The virus spreads easily and continues to infect humans.

## Avian (Bird) / Pandemic Influenza

### **What is the difference between seasonal and pandemic flu?**

Subtypes of the flu virus already present in humans cause seasonal flu outbreaks. Because they are already present, vaccines have been developed to prevent people from becoming infected or people have developed resistance because they have that type of flu before. A pandemic flu virus is caused by a new subtype of the flu virus that has never circulated in humans before. No vaccine is available at this time, so high levels of illness and death could occur.

### **How often do flu pandemics occur?**

Influenza pandemics have occurred three times in the recent past; in 1918, 1957 and 1968. Public health and medical experts believe that a pandemic will happen again soon. In some ways, we may be in more danger now because of the ease of modern air travel. Scientists worry about avian (bird) flu as the next virus to cause a pandemic because it has been shown to travel quickly among bird populations, and it can make people very sick. If the avian (bird) flu develops into a virus that is easily spread between people, a pandemic may follow.

### **What is avian or bird flu?**

Flu viruses that infect birds are known as avian influenza viruses or “Bird Flu.” Wild birds around the world carry these subtypes of influenza viruses in their intestines, usually showing no symptoms of the virus. When a domesticated bird, such as a chicken or turkey, is infected with an avian (bird) influenza virus, that bird may become sick or die.

Avian (bird) flu viruses usually do not infect humans. However, birds infected with avian (bird) influenza viruses have the virus in their saliva, nasal secretions and feces. Recent cases of avian (bird) flu in people occurred among those individuals who work closely with chickens, turkey or ducks. They may have obtained the virus by touching the saliva and feces left on surfaces by the poultry.

### **Why do I hear so much on the news about avian (bird) flu?**

One strain of avian (bird) flu (the H5N1 strain) has recently become a serious concern. The H5N1 avian (bird) influenza virus has been circulating among birds around the world. It is very contagious among birds and can be deadly. In 1997, the first case of H5N1 virus spread from birds to people in Hong Kong. Eighteen individuals got the disease and six died. Since then, other people have had cases of H5N1 influenza, killing about half of them. The H5N1 virus is prevalent in birds, and causes high levels of death in the few people who have been infected. Scientists worry and continue to track where H5N1 virus is located and have attempted to keep the virus from spreading. In 2003 and 2004, more than 100 million birds in Asia either died from the disease or were killed to try to prevent spread of the virus.

So far, the H5N1 virus has not been passed easily from one person to another. Viruses evolve over time, however. Scientists fear that soon the H5N1 virus will change into one that can easily spread from person to person. Since it is not a virus that has infected many people, no one has natural immunity against the germ and there is not yet a vaccine to protect people from the virus. An influenza outbreak of H5N1 virus could become an influenza pandemic.

## Avian (Bird) / Pandemic Influenza

### **Why isn't there a vaccine for avian (bird) flu?**

To date, there are very few cases of human-to-human transmission of the disease. The virus will have to change to make it easier to spread from person to person. An effective vaccine may have to wait until the virus makes that change. In the meantime, researchers have begun developing a vaccine based on H5N1 virus isolated in Southeast Asia in 2004. It will take several months to prepare the vaccine, test its effectiveness, and make the needed improvements. Once the vaccine has been developed, it may take a year or more to produce enough vaccine to prevent the spread of the disease.

### **Are avian (bird) flu and flu pandemic the same thing?**

Currently, scientists and public health officials feel the H5N1 avian (bird) influenza virus is the most likely virus to evolve into a new subtype of influenza, be able to infect a large number of people around the world and cause serious illness and death.

### **Will the seasonal "regular" flu shot protect from avian (bird)/pandemic flu?**

The seasonal flu shot will not protect people from avian (bird) flu. Nevertheless, people at risk for complications of flu, as well as health care workers, should always get a flu shot in the fall. Some researchers believe that the seasonal flu shot may guard against the development of new strains of influenza that can be easily passed from person to person, so the seasonal flu shot will be recommended should a flu pandemic arise.

### **Who is at risk for avian (bird) flu?**

Right now, the virus that causes avian (bird) flu (H5N1) has been identified in birds in several countries in Asia, and it appears to be spreading west to birds in Eurasia and Eastern Europe. The only people who are at risk at this time are those in affected countries who have direct contact with poultry and birds. There have been no cases of avian (bird) flu (H5N1) in birds or people in the United States.

### **When will pandemic flu arrive in Pierce County?**

The seasonal flu traditionally runs from October through April. We do not know when avian (bird)/pandemic flu might arrive.

In the first step in the development of an avian (bird)/pandemic flu, the flu virus has to mutate to a point that it can be transmitted from one person to another. Right now only those people who have direct contact with infected birds can catch the virus.

Once the avian (bird)/pandemic flu virus can be transmitted from person to person it could move around the world in days, weeks or months. Factors that determine how quickly the disease spreads include:

- How many people become infected at the beginning.
- How soon they realize they are sick and isolate themselves.
- Whether the infected people use [infection control procedures](#) to reduce infection to other people.

## Avian (Bird) / Pandemic Influenza

### What about treatment for influenza, such as Tamiflu?

Tamiflu is an antiviral medication that is known to be effective against seasonal flu and avian (bird) flu. When used for seasonal influenza, Tamiflu may help to shorten the length of time a person is sick with the flu, but only if it is taken within two days of onset of illness.

- Treatment for regular or seasonal flu:  
Home remedies such as rest, lots of fluids, and over-the-counter medicines (like Tylenol and decongestants) will help you feel better. Elderly people and young children are at most risk for hospitalization and complications from the flu. If a person has a severe choking cough, shortness of breath or trouble breathing, they should seek medical care right away.
- Treatment for avian (bird) flu:  
At this time, we don't know how avian (bird) flu affects humans and we don't know what will be effective for treating people with avian (bird) flu. Only about 120 people are known to have contracted avian (bird) flu, and most of these people have been seriously ill. About half of them have died. However, there is probably a wide range of how severe the illness can be: there have been no studies of people who may be only mildly ill or have no symptoms at all. Nonetheless, it appears that avian (bird) flu is much more serious than seasonal flu, and its complications can arise in young, healthy adults as well as elderly and children.

### During a flu pandemic, will Tamiflu be available?

The U.S. has stockpiled antiviral medications, but right now, there is only enough to treat 1-2% of the U.S. population. Plans exist to acquire more antiviral doses, but production takes time. No matter how much medication we are able to stockpile before a pandemic, it will probably not be enough. Pandemic influenza plans establish priority groups to receive antiviral treatments to reduce spread of the disease.

### Should I get a prescription for Tamiflu now to store for the coming pandemic?

No, you should not get a prescription for Tamiflu to keep at home because:

- Tamiflu is currently becoming hard to find—most of the hospitals are reporting they have very low stocks, and the drug is on back-order. Personal stashes of medications could lead to further shortages, and prevent people who really need the drug now from getting it.
- When a pandemic influenza arises, there will be specific recommendations about how to use the drug. We want to save the drug for persons with known indications, and not have medications going to waste in personal stashes.
- Viruses may become resistant if antivirals are taken inappropriately. Medical assessment and recommendations are needed to know when and how to take the medicine.
- At this time, we are not sure what the dosage will be for the new avian (bird) / pandemic virus. Prescriptions filled now may not be adequate.
- Right now, we are predicting that Tamiflu will be effective against a new pandemic flu virus, but we don't know that for sure. One of the patients in Vietnam had a virus that was resistant to Tamiflu.
- The drug is very expensive (about \$80 for a 5 day course) and may expire before it is used.

**What other resources will give me information about influenza – Seasonal, Avian or Pandemic?**

- American Lung Association Flu Shot Clinic Locator: <http://www.flucliniclocator.org/>
- Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, Avian Flu: <http://www.cdc.gov/flu/avian/>
- Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, Influenza: <http://www.cdc.gov/flu/>
- Washington Department of Health, Flu News: <http://www.doh.wa.gov/FluNews/>
- Washington Department of Health, Flu Materials in Multiple Languages: <http://www.doh.wa.gov/FluNews/#external>
- World Health Organization, Avian Flu: [http://www.who.int/csr/disease/avian\\_influenza/en/](http://www.who.int/csr/disease/avian_influenza/en/)
- World Health Organization, Influenza: <http://www.who.int/csr/disease/influenza/en/>