

PANDEMIC FLU

GUIDANCE FOR CLEANING STAFF
AND REFUSE COLLECTORS IN
NON-HEALTH CARE SETTINGS

A stylized, light blue world map showing the continents of North America, South America, Africa, Europe, and Asia. The map is overlaid with a grid of latitude and longitude lines.

What you need to know
and how to protect yourself
and others

Everyone will be involved in the fight against pandemic influenza (flu) in terms of managing the impact it will have on society and preventing further spread of the infection.

This guidance explains how cleaning staff and refuse collectors working in non-health care settings, in the course of their daily work, can protect themselves, their colleagues and their families, and prevent the spread of flu.

WHAT IS PANDEMIC FLU?

Flu is a familiar infection in the UK, especially during the winter months. The illness, caused by the flu virus, can be mild or severe and, at times, can lead to death.

Generally, some groups of people are more susceptible to flu than others especially older people, young children and people with certain medical conditions. This is why the flu vaccination is recommended to these groups of people each year.

Pandemic flu is different from ordinary flu because it occurs when a new flu virus emerges into the human population and spreads from person-to-person worldwide – all countries will be affected.

As it is a new virus, the entire population will be susceptible because no one will have any immunity to it. Therefore, healthy adults as well as older people, young children and people with existing medical conditions will be affected. The lack of immunity in the UK population will mean that the virus has the potential to spread very quickly between people. This will result in many more people becoming severely ill and many more deaths.

The circumstances exist now for a new flu virus to emerge and spread worldwide. Although a pandemic has not yet started, experts warn that it could be soon. It is most likely that the new virus will arise from an avian (bird) flu virus mixing with the human flu virus and becoming able to infect people.

SIGNS AND SYMPTOMS OF FLU

It is likely that the signs and symptoms of pandemic flu will be the same as for ordinary flu but may be more severe and cause more serious complications.

The most significant symptoms are the sudden onset of:

- Fever
- Cough or shortness of breath

Other symptoms may include:

- Headache
- Tiredness
- Chills
- Aching muscles
- Sore throat
- Runny nose
- Sneezing
- Loss of appetite

The incubation period (time between contact with the virus and the onset of symptoms)

The range is from one to four days, for most people it will be two to three days.

The infectious period (how long you are infectious to others)

People are most infectious soon after they develop symptoms though they can continue to shed the virus, for example in coughs and sneezes, typically for up to five days (seven days in children). People become less infectious as their symptoms subside and once symptoms are gone, they are considered no longer infectious to others.

WHAT YOU SHOULD YOU DO IF YOU HAVE SYMPTOMS OR ARE ILL

If you feel ill whilst at work, report it immediately to your manager or occupational health department. Do not simply carry on working.

If you develop symptoms whilst not at work:

- Stay at home
- Do not go to work until you are fully recovered
- Phone your supervisor/manager or occupational health department
- For advice and an initial assessment of symptoms, contact the National Flu Line service in the first instance

HOW IS PANDEMIC FLU CAUGHT AND SPREAD TO OTHERS?

Flu, including pandemic flu, is spread from person-to-person by close contact. Some examples of how it can be spread include:

- Coughing and/or sneezing by an infected person within a short distance (usually one metre or less) of someone
- Touching or shaking the hand of an infected person and then touching your mouth, eyes or nose without first washing your hands
- Touching surfaces or objects (eg door handles) that have become contaminated with the flu virus and then touching your mouth, eyes or nose without first washing your hands
- In some circumstances, it is thought that the virus may be passed on in fine droplets – aerosols. This is not considered a major route of transmission and is only likely to occur during some medical procedures.

WHAT YOU CAN DO TO PROTECT YOURSELF AND OTHERS FROM PANDEMIC FLU

- Use a tissue to cover your nose and mouth when coughing and/or sneezing. Dispose of the tissue promptly and then wash your hands
- Clean hands frequently with soap and water, especially after coughing, sneezing, and using tissues. An alcohol handrub could be used as an alternative for cleaning hands
- Avoid touching your mouth, eyes and/or nose, unless you have recently cleaned your hands
- Use normal household detergent and water to clean surfaces frequently touched by hands
- Before you leave work you should wash your hands, and then wash them again soon after you arrive home
- Tissues should be disposed of in domestic waste and do not require any special treatment. Used tissues should be put in a waste bin immediately after use or as soon as is feasible. You should wash your hands after the tissues have been disposed of



PERSONAL PROTECTIVE EQUIPMENT (PPE)

- Ensure that you are aware of your employer's procedures regarding personal protective equipment (PPE) and that you are using them correctly
- Use the PPE (usually aprons, surgical masks and gloves) as directed by your manager, when there is a risk of contamination from respiratory secretions
- Whilst the appropriate use of PPE may offer some protection to clothes from contamination, during the pandemic you may wish to consider changing out of your work clothes before travelling home. Work clothes that are washed at home can be washed in a domestic washing machine
- Used PPE can be disposed of in domestic waste, preferably in tied black bags. There is no need for non-healthcare settings to introduce clinical waste procedures for the disposal of PPE during an influenza pandemic

SPECIFIC ISSUES

Evidence suggests that the flu virus does not survive for long periods of time on soft items although it can survive up to 24 hours on hard surfaces.

Virus survival:

- Hard, non-porous surfaces (eg stainless steel counter or plastic bowls): flu virus is able to survive for up to 72 hours but only for 24 hours in large enough quantities to pose a risk of infection
- Soft surfaces/furnishings (eg clothes, handkerchiefs, tissues, magazines): flu virus is able to survive for up to 12 hours but only for about 15 minutes in large enough quantities to pose an infection risk
- Once the virus is transferred to hands, it survives for less than five minutes
- Cleaning your hands with soap and water (followed by drying) is an effective way to kill flu virus on your hands
- The flu virus is killed within 30 seconds by an alcohol handrub

SPECIFIC HYGIENE MEASURES

The risk of becoming infected with the virus is effectively reduced by following strict hygiene measures.

Hand hygiene

Hands must be cleaned:

- When arriving at and leaving the workplace
- When arriving at home from work or outside activities
- Before and after direct contact with contaminated surfaces
- After contact with body secretions
- After removing protective work clothing and gloves
- After handling soiled items
- Before handling food
- Before eating
- Before smoking
- Before touching your mouth, nose or eyes

Hands can be cleaned by washing with soap and water (followed by drying) or using alcohol handrubs. If your hands are visibly dirty, soap and water should be used. Alcohol handrubs are good alternatives if water is not available and hands are not visibly dirty.

Environmental hygiene

Cleaning and disinfection procedures: The flu virus is easily killed by commonly available cleaning products and detergents. Freshly prepared detergent and water should be used for surface cleaning. Rooms, public premises such as elevators and reception desks should be cleaned at least once a day. Damp rather than dry dusting should be performed.

Hands should be washed after all cleaning procedures. The use of gloves does not replace this.

Rubbish bags: If you have to collect or move open bags or garbage from litter bins there is no need to take any extra precautions. The risk of infection by contact with tissues or contaminated material is very low but it is recommended that gloves are used if handling soiled tissues. If gloves are not available, hands should be cleaned promptly after doing this. Gloves do not replace the need for frequent hand washing.

Street cleaning: No extra precaution is needed. Follow your employer's hygiene procedures in order to avoid transmission of most infectious diseases, including flu.

It is important to bear in mind that the risk of a flu infection from work is negligible if you clean your hands during and after your shift, and you and your co-workers do not turn up for work if you have flu symptoms.

BEING PREPARED

Knowing what to do

If a flu pandemic starts, it will eventually affect the UK. Currently all services and organisations are developing contingency plans in order to try to maintain essential services in the event that large numbers of people become ill.

You can be prepared by knowing what to do and by becoming familiar with your own organisation's contingency and pandemic plans.

- Remember the signs and symptoms of flu
- If you are ill whilst at home, do not go to work. Telephone your supervisor/manager
- If you become ill whilst on duty, do not carry on working. Inform your supervisor/manager immediately
- Follow your company's hygiene protocol at all times
- Above all else, you must observe strict hand hygiene and respiratory etiquette

Further Information

Infection control training materials aimed primarily at the healthcare sector can be accessed at: www.dh.gov.uk/en/PandemicFlu/DH_078752. This includes posters on the correct use of personal protective equipment (PPE) and effective hand hygiene.

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