

# PANDEMIC FLU

GUIDANCE FOR THE  
FIRE AND RESCUE SERVICE

A faint, blue-tinted world map showing the continents of North America, South America, Europe, Africa, and Asia, serving as a background for the lower half of the page.

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 booklet explains how members of the Fire and Rescue Service can, in the course of their daily work, 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 senior officer 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 station 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
- Wash 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 senior officer, 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

During a pandemic, most people you will meet in the course of your work will not have flu. However, there may be specific situations where you may be involved in administering first aid or resuscitating someone who has flu-like symptoms. In these situations, you should follow standard guidance as issued by the service.

### **Giving oxygen to people**

Any oxygen masks used should be cleaned with soap and water before they are re-used. Sharing of oxygen masks between people (members of the public and crew members) should not be encouraged although operational needs come first and may mean that this is unavoidable.

### **Actions when mouth-to-mouth resuscitation is needed**

If a fire fighter needs to give mouth-to-mouth resuscitation to someone they should use a one-way resuscitation device, eg a Laerdal mask with face shield and filter.

### **Using an Ambubag® or similar device**

Sometimes fire crew are called upon to bag someone who has stopped breathing using an Ambubag® or similar device, until the ambulance crew arrive. When this happens, the fire-fighter who does this should wear a surgical mask and gloves.

### **Use of breathing apparatus**

Fire crews will not need to use breathing apparatus purely because they think they may come into contact with members of the public who have pandemic flu.

### **Hand hygiene**

Effective and frequent hand hygiene may be crucial in reducing the risk of spreading infection. All crew members should have ready access to an alcohol handrub when hand washing facilities are not available.



## **Use of PPE when entering premises where it is believed that the occupants have a flu-like illness**

During a flu pandemic, visits to premises should be restricted to those that are essential or emergencies. If a non-essential visit cannot be postponed and you believe any of the occupants has a flu-like illness, you should put on an apron, surgical mask and gloves before you enter the premises.

Once outside of a building, take off your gloves, then the apron and finally the surgical mask by undoing the ties around the back of the head; do not touch the front of the mask. Dispose of gloves, apron and mask in a dustbin or plastic bag and clean your hands with soap and water (followed by drying) immediately. Use alcohol handrub if soap and water are unavailable.

## **Use of PPE when wearing undress uniform (normal day-to-day working rig)**

When fire crew are wearing their undress uniform, they should only need to wear an apron, surgical mask and gloves if they need to come into close contact (within one metre) of someone with flu-like illness. Special precautions are not necessary if the people you come into contact with do not have flu-like symptoms.

## **Use of PPE when wearing fire fighting kit**

When crew are using their fire fighting kit (eg while wearing fire kit and breathing apparatus) it will be impossible to use flu specific PPE. It is likely that fire fighting kit will offer some protection if crew have to attend someone who has flu-like symptoms. If no one at the premises has flu-like symptoms, no additional precautions are necessary.

## **When to use an FFP3 respirator<sup>1</sup>, a fluid resistant gown and eye protection**

It is very unlikely that fire crew will need to wear the PPE described above. The only situation when fire crew would need to use this PPE is if they were asked to assist ambulance crew with an aerosol generating healthcare procedure (eg placing a tube into the lungs of someone who has stopped breathing). It is important to be aware that training and fit testing will be required for anyone using an FFP3 respirator.

## **THE FIRE AND RESCUE SERVICE MAY WORK DIFFERENTLY DURING THE PANDEMIC**

During a pandemic flu, the Fire and Rescue Service may work in a different way to how it works now:

- As the pandemic escalates, only essential or emergency activities should be undertaken. If an activity cannot be postponed and it may involve contact with people with flu-like illness, then you should make sure you put on an apron, surgical mask and gloves before visiting the premises. This will be done to reduce the risk of exposure to people with flu-like illness in the population and ensure that sufficient staff are available to deal with emergencies
- Work patterns may be rostered to try and minimise contact between fire fighters on different watches, and watch rosters may be changed if large numbers of fire fighters are affected by flu at the same time

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<sup>1</sup>FFP3 respirators are multi layered masks, often with a valve at the front. They provide a high level of protection but are only used when the risk of infection is significant (such as intubating an individual who has flu-like illness).

## BEING PREPARED

### **Knowing what to do**

If a pandemic flu 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 will be required to work differently in order to manage acute staff shortages and to prevent the spread of infection.

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

- Remember the signs and symptoms of flu
- If you are ill whilst at home, do not come into work. Telephone your station or occupational health department
- If you become ill whilst on duty, do not carry on working. Inform your line manager immediately
- 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](http://www.dh.gov.uk/en/PandemicFlu/DH_078752). This includes posters on the correct use of personal protective equipment (PPE) and effective hand hygiene.

Produced jointly by the Department of Health and the Health Protection Agency in collaboration with the Department of Communities and Local Government and the Chief Fire Officers Association.

285392/2 1p Jan 08