

PANDEMIC FLU

GUIDANCE FOR
FUNERAL DIRECTORS

A faint, blue-tinted world map showing the continents of North America, South America, Europe, Africa, and Asia, 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 booklet explains how funeral directors, embalmers and other staff 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 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 employer 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 employer, 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

Body bags

Body bags are **not necessary** for cadavers where flu has been implicated in the death, unless it is thought likely that there would be leakage in transit, or the bodies are otherwise offensive. Bodies cool more slowly inside a body bag, facilitating decomposition and making hygienic preparation more difficult. This may mean that it may only be possible to display the head for viewing causing additional distress to the bereaved.

Laying out

Hygienic preparation of bodies involving washing the face and hands, closing the eyes and mouth, tidying the hair and possibly shaving the face is permissible. This includes plugging orifices to prevent discharges, or covering any wounds.

In some cultures and religious groups, relatives expect to carry out the ritual preparation before burial and, in most cases, this can be permitted but they should be advised to wear gloves and simple protective plastic aprons, also they should be supervised and wash their hands with soap and water afterwards.

Viewing and touching the face may also be permitted except where a risk of infection other than influenza exists. For other infections this will need to be assessed and appropriate advice given. This may mean only partial preparation and the use of gloves and other protective clothing.

Embalming

Since embalming involves the injection of solutions containing formaldehyde, the risk of infection is reduced for most infectious diseases; flu is no exception; however, the solution may not penetrate infectious mucus in the upper respiratory tract.

The workrooms of funeral parlours must be of a standard acceptable to the environmental health department of the local authority. Staff with skin abrasions, cuts, severe eczema or other skin conditions, should report this fact to their supervisor and use

impermeable water-proof dressings over the lesions. Staff with uncovered skin lesions or cuts should not work on any body where any infection is likely. Coffins and any body bags used must be leak-proof. Visitors should be subject to the same rules of hygiene and must be supervised if in the workroom.

Environmental procedures/issues

Body fluids or other contaminated liquids may be discharged into the drainage system, but as far as practical, this should be disinfected before discharge. It should be noted that due to the very high organic load of these liquids, any disinfection process will be of poor quality and should not be relied on. Steps should still be taken to minimise the risk of splashes and droplets, and PPE should be used to protect the face, and to a lesser extent, the body.

All non-liquid waste should be put into hazardous infectious waste (yellow) bags, transported and disposed of by incineration or an acceptable licensed company. The *Safe management of healthcare waste* 2006 document from the Department of Health, provides guidance on the implementation of the Hazardous Waste Regulation 2005.

Controlling the risks of infection at work from human remains: a guide for those involved in funeral services (including embalmers) and those involved in exhumation, produced by the Health and Safety Executive in June 2005, is useful guidance to be read in conjunction with this section. This can be accessed at www.hse.gov.uk/pubns/web01.pdf.

All instruments should be cleaned in warm (not hot) water and detergent. Running water should not be used as it facilitates splashing. Instruments should then be disinfected according to your employer's infection control policy.

All spills of blood or other body fluids should be cleaned up promptly. Protective clothing should be worn (gloves and plastic apron). Blood spill should be soaked up by using hypochlorite granules¹ and the spillage mopped up promptly with disposable paper towels. The granules or towels should be scraped/soaked up and placed in a yellow clinical (infectious) waste bag. The area should then be cleaned with general purpose detergent and hot water. For general cleaning of the environment, a general purpose detergent and hot water is preferred. Hypochlorite should not be used in the presence of formaldehyde as there is evidence that hypochlorites can react with formaldehyde to produce a carcinogen. An absorbent substance without hypochlorite should be used.

Any action that will bring a staff member's hands in contact with their face whilst undertaking an embalming procedure should be avoided. Strict banning of eating, smoking or drinking must be enforced within work areas.

YOUR BUSINESS MAY WORK DIFFERENTLY DURING THE PANDEMIC

During a flu pandemic, your business may work in a different way from how it works now. It is likely that there will be a larger number of deaths than usual over a fairly short period of time and therefore cemeteries or crematoria may be working much longer hours to keep up with the likely demand. There may be staff shortages due to illness in employees and their families.

¹Chlorine is corrosive to metals and will react with formaldehyde. When chlorine-releasing granules come into contact with urine, chlorine fumes may be released which may lead to respiratory problems.

BEING PREPARED

Knowing what to do

If a flu pandemic starts, it will eventually affect the UK. Currently all local authorities are developing plans and preparing to deal with the large numbers of cadavers that may require burial or cremation.

This might involve special storage facilities for cadavers or for crematoria or cemeteries to operate on an extended or 24-hour basis.

You can be prepared by knowing what to do and by becoming familiar with your employer's safety and handling procedures.

- The Control of Substances Hazardous to Health (COSHH) regulations must be followed at all times
- The risk of infection from cadavers affected by pandemic flu is low and is minimised by the use of strict infection control procedures such as the use of appropriate protective clothing
- A body bag should only be considered if there is leakage of body fluids
- Hygienic preparation of the body is permitted
- If the body is being collected from home and others in the house are unwell, then a surgical mask should be worn
- The body can be handled; viewing and touching are allowed
- Embalming may be carried out in the normal way
- Remember the signs and symptoms of flu
- If you are ill whilst at home, do not go into work. Telephone your place of work
- If you become ill whilst on duty, do not carry on working. Inform your manager immediately
- Follow your company's hygiene protocol at all times
- Above all else you must observe strict hand and respiratory hygiene

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.

Produced jointly by the Department of Health and the Health Protection Agency in collaboration with the National Association of Funeral Directors (NAFD) and the Society of Allied and Independent Funeral Directors (SAIF).

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