

GENERAL PANDEMIC INFLUENZA QUESTIONS

What is an influenza pandemic?	A pandemic is a global disease outbreak. An influenza pandemic occurs when a new influenza A virus emerges for which there is little or no immunity in the human population, begins to cause serious illness, and then spreads easily person-to-person worldwide.
How do pandemic viruses occur?	New influenza viruses emerge as a result of a process called antigenic shift, which causes a sudden and major change in influenza A viruses. These changes occur when proteins on the surface of the virus combine in new ways as a result of mutation or exchange of genetic material between multiple influenza viruses. If such changes result in a new influenza A virus subtype that can infect humans and spread easily from person to person, an influenza pandemic can occur.
Why are pandemics such dreaded events?	Influenza pandemics are remarkable events that can rapidly infect virtually all countries. Once international spread begins, pandemics are considered unstoppable, because the virus spreads very rapidly by coughing or sneezing. The fact that infected people can share the virus before symptoms appear adds to the risk of international spread via travelers.
What age groups are most likely to be affected during an influenza pandemic?	Although scientists cannot predict the specific consequences of an influenza pandemic, it is likely that many age groups would be seriously affected. The greatest risk of hospitalization and death – as seen during the last two pandemics in 1957 and 1968 and during annual influenza – will be infants, the elderly, and those with underlying health conditions. However, in the 1918 pandemic, most deaths occurred in young adults. Few if any people would have immunity to the virus.
Which groups will be especially vulnerable during an influenza pandemic?	In an influenza pandemic, some people may be at higher risk for becoming sick, or they may need extra help for a variety of reasons. Those who are vulnerable will vary from community to community, but they are likely to include people with existing health issues or those that may have limited access to health care under even normal circumstances and those not proficient in English.