

## Pandemic Influenza Alert

### *Social Distancing to Control the Risk*

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June 18, 2007

*This is the sixth in a series of Pandemic Influenza Alerts to help employees understand what a pandemic is, what needs to be done to prepare for pandemic influenza, and what could happen during a pandemic.*

If a pandemic influenza develops, it will happen because some of the viruses that were transmitted from bird to human will have evolved to be efficient at transmitting itself from human to human. In a pandemic, most people who are infected will be carrying virus they acquired not from birds, but from other people. Influenza is spread by droplets during face-to-face contact. There is also good evidence that influenza is spread through airborne spread, which means transmission could occur in enclosed spaces containing large groups of people. Airborne spread may be reduced by avoiding enclosed spaces where many people congregate.

Theoretically the use of medical masks, especially types like N95 masks, could help protect against influenza. There is some evidence that influenza may be spread by contaminated clothing or bedding that is capable of absorbing and transmitting the virus. Hands can become contaminated, which then spread the infection to mucous membranes. This suggests that basic infection control measures, like proper hand washing could lessen the change of influenza transmission.

Incubation period for influenza is usually 1-3 days after contact with the virus. People infected with influenza are contagious or infectious 24-48 hours before symptoms appear and they are contagious after symptoms appear. Adults are contagious for 3-5 days after symptoms appear and children are contagious up to 7 days.

At the start of an influenza pandemic, effective vaccine and antiviral drugs may not be available to the general population. The main defense to protect yourself from the virus will be Social Distancing. Social Distancing minimizes the kind of social contact that enables virus transmission. One example of a social distancing is limiting functions that require assembling lots of people into a single indoor space, such as meetings, conferences, or workshops. Here are some examples of social distancing practices that you can adopt at work during an influenza outbreak to prevent the spread of the virus.

- Avoid handshakes - Handshaking as a customary greeting enables virus transmission through skin-to-skin contact. Substitute something else — smile, wave or bump elbows.
- Avoid the lunch time rush - Whether you eat lunch in the break room, a snack bar or at a restaurant, avoid the rush. Eat earlier or later to avoid the rush, or eat with just a few people in the break room, a conference room or a large office.
- Use telemeetings to replace face-to-face meetings - Reducing the number or duration of face-to-face meetings limits the opportunity for virus transmission. Shift as much of the agenda as possible to email or teleconference.
- Use larger conference rooms - If you must meet face-to-face, use the largest available conference room. Larger rooms have better ventilation, and there's more room to spread out.
- Avoid using public pens - Public pens are found at the retail counter, at the building or hotel guest registration, at the bank, and many other places. Use your own pen. In conference rooms, don't use the public whiteboard markers. Carry your own.
- Avoid the commuter rush periods - If you commute via public transportation, take advantage of the flex time policy to shift your working hours. Avoid times when you'll be exposed to crowded buses.

If you become infected with influenza, the most important preventative measure that persons with influenza can choose is to isolate themselves until 1 week (respiratory isolation) after they become ill with influenza. People who are not infected with influenza may need to choose to avoid all people who may be potentially infected (social distancing).

Social Distancing will not be able to be done by some people. In addition, not every one who strictly applies these principles will avoid infection. But Social Distancing will be able to protect some people. Since medical preventive measures such as vaccines and antivirals will not be available for at least months, you may be faced with either no protective measures or using Social Distancing as a preventive means.

**Information on Pandemic Influenza**

For more information Division of Air Quality web page on Pandemic Influenza Information at

<http://daq.state.nc.us/employee/pandemic/>.