

ADVISORY BULLETIN

PANDEMIC FLU – ARE YOU PREPARED?

Based on the state of the avian flu that is now an endemic in Asia, public health experts predict that a pandemic influenza may sweep the world in the near future. The avian flu is lethal to chickens and ducks, and the virus has jumped to humans where the affected persons have had close contact with these birds. As of January 2006, over 170 people from a number of Asian countries and in Turkey have contracted the flu, and 80 of them have died. The virus responsible for the flu and currently confined to birds, the Influenza A type H5N1 virus, has transformed over the years and is said to be one step away from becoming a virus that can be transmitted from human to human.

Due to the nature of the current avian flu virus, the fast spread of the flu in chickens and birds in Asia and into eastern Europe, and the strong possibility that this virus may mutate to a human flu virus, the World Health Organization has issued a pandemic alert and advised governments worldwide to prepare plans to deal with such an eventuality.

Outbreaks of pandemic flu in the past have killed large numbers of people and have severely disrupted lives and economies worldwide. The potential impact of an outbreak in Canada is as follows: 4.5 to 10.6 million people clinically ill; 2 to 5 million seeking outpatient care; 34 to 138 thousand requiring hospitalization, and 11 to 58 thousand dead. The economic losses could be in the billions of dollars.

The Canadian government and the Province of New Brunswick are developing plans to fulfill their obligations in the event of a pandemic flu outbreak. The Workplace Health, Safety and Compensation Commission (WHSCC) advises employers to have emergency preparedness plans developed to deal with the workplace health and safety issues resulting from a pandemic influenza. This could include work-continuity plans and infection-reduction measures. Some experts predict that there will be an absenteeism rate of up to 25%, with another further 25% of employees in a weakened state of health for 5 to 8 working days.



The WHSCC will update employers as the situation develops. Employers who are interested in flu pandemic preparedness are encouraged to visit the websites listed below for more information.

Government of Canada
www.influenza.gc.ca

New Brunswick Department of Health
www.gnb.ca/0053/factsheets/avian-e.asp

World Health Organization
<http://www.who.int/csr/disease/influenza/pandemic/en/>