



Chartered
Institute of
Environmental
Health



PANDEMIC FLU

GUIDANCE FOR ENVIRONMENTAL
HEALTH PRACTITIONERS

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 guidance explains how environmental health practitioners working in local authorities, health services or private sector settings, in the course of their daily work, can protect themselves, their colleagues and their families, and inform, advise and support others to 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 supervisor/manager 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
- Clean 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

Virus survival

Evidence suggests that the flu virus does not survive for long periods of time on soft items although it can survive up to 24 hours on hard surfaces.

- Hard, non-porous surfaces (eg stainless steel counter or plastic bowls): flu virus is able to survive for up to 72 hours but only for 24 hours in large enough quantities to pose a risk of infection
- Soft surfaces/furnishings (eg clothes, handkerchiefs, tissues, magazines): flu virus is able to survive for up to 12 hours but only for about 15 minutes in large enough quantities to pose an infection risk
- Once the virus is transferred to hands, it survives for less than five minutes
- Cleaning your hands with soap and water (followed by drying) is an effective way to kill flu virus on your hands
- The flu virus is killed within 30 seconds by an alcohol handrub

HYGIENE MEASURES

The risk of becoming infected with the virus is effectively reduced by following strict hygiene measures.

Hand hygiene

Hands must be cleaned:

- When arriving at and leaving the workplace
- When arriving at home from work or outside activities
- Before and after direct contact with contaminated surfaces
- After contact with body secretions
- After removing protective work clothing and gloves
- After handling soiled items
- Before handling food

- Before eating
- Before smoking
- Before touching your mouth, nose or eyes

Hands can be cleaned by washing with soap and water (followed by drying) or using alcohol handrubs. If your hands are visibly dirty, soap and water should be used. Alcohol handrubs are good alternatives if water is not available and hands are not visibly dirty.

ENVIRONMENTAL HYGIENE

Cleaning and disinfection procedures

The flu virus is easily killed by commonly available cleaning products and detergents. Freshly prepared detergent and warm water should be used for surface cleaning. Hand contact surfaces in workplaces and public areas should be cleaned frequently and at least once a day. Damp rather than dry dusting should be performed.

Hands should be washed after all cleaning procedures. The use of gloves does not replace this.

Cutlery and crockery

There is no need to use disposable plates and cutlery. The combination of hot water and detergent used in dishwashers is sufficient to clean dishes and eating utensils used by people who may be ill with flu. It is not necessary to separate eating utensils used by people who may be ill with flu from those used by others.

Laundry procedures

Laundry should be washed according to standard procedures. It is not necessary to separate linen and laundry used by people who may be ill with flu from other laundry. Care should be used when handling used laundry (ie avoid 'hugging' the laundry). Hand hygiene should be performed after handling any soiled laundry.

Disposal of used tissues

Tissues used by people who may be ill with flu should be placed in a plastic bag, sealed then disposed of with other waste. Consider placing bags in all waste bins in rooms for this purpose (remember to practice hand hygiene after you have sealed the bag and again should you subsequently dispose of this waste in your refuse uplift area outside the premises).

Room decontamination

There is no need for fumigation or other special measures where a room is occupied or has been vacated after occupation by people who may be ill with flu.

- Staff who clean rooms occupied by an ill person must wear an apron and gloves before cleaning (Personal Protective Equipment (PPE))
- Wearing a facemask is only necessary if the ill person is in the room at the same time
- Ventilate the room by opening external windows
- Remove the bed linen and towels and place in a bag
- Do not leave loose items in the corridor or common parts
- Dispose of all disposable items such as sachets and toilet rolls
- Clean remaining items such as cups, glasses etc using water and detergent
- Apply your chosen cleaning product and allow as much contact time as possible before wiping clean
- Pay particular attention to hand contact surfaces eg door handles, light switches, telephone handsets, TV remote control, bedside tables
- Use plenty of cleaning cloths to avoid re-contaminating surfaces

Rubbish bags

There is no need to take any extra precautions when collecting or moving open bags or garbage from waste bins. The risk of infection by contact with tissues or contaminated material is very low but it is recommended that gloves are used if handling soiled tissues. If gloves are not available, hands should be cleaned promptly after doing this. Gloves do not replace the need for frequent hand washing.

Litter control and street cleaning

No extra precaution is needed. Normal hygiene procedures should be followed in order to avoid transmission of most infectious diseases, including flu.

It is important to bear in mind that the risk of a flu infection from work is negligible if you clean your hands during and at the end of your work, and you and your co-workers do not turn up for work if you have flu symptoms.

SPECIFIC ISSUES FOR HOTEL, HOSTEL AND GUEST HOUSE TYPE ACCOMMODATION

Most guests will be able to remain in the hotel whilst they are ill and will simply require hygiene advice and general care in the hotel and advice about access to medication and medical care if their condition gets worse.

Hotels are not expected to provide nursing care or supervision but most hotels have established mechanisms for access to medical advice for guests.

Staff caring for guests who have flu may benefit from wearing surgical masks, but only when coming into close contact (within one metre) and only if the guest has flu symptoms. Masks should not be worn continuously by staff and should not be seen as a substitute for hand hygiene and other basic precautions. Follow HSE guidance at www.hse.gov.uk about pandemic influenza precautions in the workplace.

Wearing gloves and gowns is not recommended for staff members not involved in looking after symptomatic guests.

WHAT ARE STAFF TRAINING AND PROTECTIVE MEASURES FOR PANDEMIC FLU?

1. Staff should be aware of the symptoms of pandemic flu and the measures to protect themselves from acquiring the illness
2. Staff should be informed of their duty to report any illness to their manager and to report any illness in guests
3. Staff should be instructed in specific cleaning procedures and the desirability of room isolation of infected guests (although this cannot be enforced)
4. Staff should be informed that there are legal duties that require both themselves and the management to comply with pandemic influenza protection measures
5. Staff involved with cleaning the room of a symptomatic guest will require PPE. This should be put on before entering the room. Staff must be informed about the importance of removing all used PPE and placing it in appropriate bags together with disposable cloths,

paper towels etc and ensuring that the bag is tied securely before they leave the room being cleaned

6. Staff must be instructed in the importance of frequent hand washing if they are involved in cleaning or in personal care of persons with pandemic flu.
7. Staff must be aware of the correct laundry procedures.

USING PPE

During a pandemic, visits to premises should be restricted to those that are essential or emergencies. In any case, most people you will meet in the course of your work will not have flu. This is because everyone will have been advised to stay at home if they feel unwell and believe that they may have flu-like symptoms. However, there may be specific situations where environmental health practitioners may be involved in visiting premises where there may be someone who has flu-like symptoms, eg investigating or preventing food poisoning in a care home. In these situations, you should follow standard guidance as issued by your employer, which may include the use of PPE.

Removing and disposing of PPE

In order to minimise risk to others from used PPE, it must be removed in a standard manner.

- First remove the gloves, by turning them inside out in one single motion; then remove the apron and finally the face mask if worn
- You should avoid touching the front of the mask (by using the ties or tapes)
- Used PPE should be bagged, tied or sealed and disposed of as domestic waste
- After disposing of the PPE in the bin, you should clean your hands with soap and water
- If the hands are not visibly soiled, an alcohol hand rub can be used as an alternative

Note: as environmental health practitioners you need to be able to demonstrate the correct and appropriate use of PPE.

BEING PREPARED

Knowing what to do

If a flu pandemic 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 can be prepared by knowing what to do and by becoming familiar with your own organisation's contingency and pandemic plans.

- Remember the signs and symptoms of flu
- If you are ill whilst at home, do not go to work. Telephone your place of work to let your employer know that you are ill
- If you become ill whilst on duty, do not carry on working. Inform your supervisor/manager immediately
- Follow your employer's hygiene protocol at all times
- Above all else, you must observe strict hand hygiene and respiratory etiquette.

During a flu pandemic, environmental health practitioners may be expected to work in different ways to how they work now:

- As the pandemic escalates, it will probably be necessary to cancel all non urgent/routine activities and it is likely that only essential work will continue. 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 to minimise contact between officers and shift patterns may be changed if large numbers of officers are affected by flu at the same time
- There may be changes to the way in which deaths in the community are dealt with.

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.

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