

# Pandemic Flu, Ordinary Flu and Avian Flu

## Ordinary Flu

Ordinary flu occurs every year during the winter months in the UK.

- ❖ It affects 10-15% of the UK population, causing around 12,000 deaths every year.
- ❖ Globally, epidemics of 'ordinary' flu are thought to kill between 500,000 – 1 million people every year.
- ❖ Most people recover from ordinary flu within 1 - 2 weeks without requiring medical treatment.
- ❖ Deaths are generally confined to 'at risk' groups including:
  - Elderly people over 65 years of age
  - People with existing medical conditions such as lung diseases, diabetes, cancer, kidney or heart problems
  - People whose immune systems are compromised due to HIV/AIDS or because they have a transplant, for example
  - The very young
- ❖ The vaccine against ordinary flu is effective because the strain in circulation each winter can be fairly reliably predicted.
- ❖ Annual vaccinations, when the correct virus strain is fairly reliably predicted, and antiviral drugs are available for those at serious risk.

## Pandemic Flu

Pandemic flu occurs roughly every thirty years and can take place in any season.

- ❖ It affects many more people than 'ordinary' flu – a quarter or more of the population – and is associated with much higher rates of illness and death. For example, the worst flu pandemic last century – 1918 'Spanish Flu', caused around 250,000 deaths in UK alone and up to 40 million deaths worldwide.
- ❖ Pandemic flu, usually associated with a higher severity of illness and consequently a higher risk of death, represents a much more serious infection than ordinary flu.
- ❖ People of all age groups may be at risk of infection with pandemic flu, not just 'at risk' groups.
- ❖ A vaccine against pandemic flu will not be available at the start of the pandemic. This is because the virus strain will be completely new. It will be different from the viruses that circulated the previous winter, and not predictable in the same way.
- ❖ Antiviral drugs may be limited in supply; their use depending on evidence of their efficacy that will only emerge once the pandemic is under way.

## Avian Flu

Bird – or avian – flu is caused by a virus that usually infects birds (particularly poultry) but occasionally crosses the species barrier and infects humans – recently predominantly in the far East, although it also happens elsewhere.

- ❖ Until recently, avian flu was thought to affect people rarely and usually cause only mild disease such as conjunctivitis. Since 1997, however, one strain of bird flu – H5N1 – has been associated with a very high death rate when people have been affected.
- ❖ There is no evidence of infection due to eating poultry meat that has been thoroughly cooked.

## Influenza Vaccine

- ❖ The Joint Committee on Vaccination and Immunisation (JCVI) [an independent advisory committee] advises the Government on issues relating to immunisation. It will make recommendations to the Government for prioritising groups for vaccination.
- ❖ Antiviral agents can be used to prevent influenza, for example in the early stages of a pandemic. But, again, until the virus starts circulating it is not possible to know how effective antivirals will be, or the best way to use them. The UK is building up a stockpile of antiviral drugs against the contingency of an influenza pandemic. We will be directed when these should be issued – until then we will not be issuing prescriptions for these drugs.

## Reduce your risk and protect yourself and your family.

You can reduce, but not eliminate, the risk of catching or spreading influenza during a pandemic by:

- ❖ Covering your nose and mouth when coughing or sneezing, using a tissue when possible.
- ❖ Disposing of dirty tissues promptly and carefully – bag and bin them.
- ❖ Avoiding non-essential travel and large crowds whenever possible.
- ❖ Maintaining good basic hygiene, for example washing your hands frequently with soap and water to reduce the spread of the virus from your hands to your face, or to other people.
- ❖ Cleaning hard surfaces (e.g. kitchen work tops, door handles) frequently, using a normal cleaning product.
- ❖ Make sure your children follow this advice.

## If you do catch flu:

- ❖ Stay home and rest
- ❖ Take medicines such as aspirin, ibuprofen or paracetamol to relieve the symptoms (following the instructions with the medicines). *Children under 16 must not be given aspirin or ready-made flu remedies containing aspirin.*
- ❖ Drink plenty of fluids

## Antibiotics? Flu jab?

- ❖ Influenza is a virus, so antibiotics will not work unless the influenza has led to a bacterial illness that requires treatment.
- ❖ If you are over 65 or in any of the 'at risk' groups due an 'ordinary' flu jab you should have it

*Further information can be found on the DoH website – [www.dh.gov.uk](http://www.dh.gov.uk)*