

Pandemic Flu Fact Sheet

A Parents' Guide to Helping Families Cope with a Pandemic Flu

Developed by the NCTSN Terrorism and Disaster Committee, May 2009

No one knows when a pandemic influenza (flu) might occur or how severe it might be. In the event of a pandemic flu, your first concern as a parent will likely be how to protect and take care of your family, so it is important for you to be knowledgeable and prepared in advance. This fact sheet provides basic information on pandemic flu. It will help you think about how pandemic flu might affect your family—both physically and emotionally—and what you can do to help your family cope.

Description: Different Types of Flu

There are major differences between *seasonal flu*, which occurs every year, and *pandemic flu*, which occurs only three or four times in a century.¹⁻⁴

- **Seasonal flu** (also called *common flu*) is a respiratory illness caused by a flu virus that has previously circulated in the population and is transmitted from person to person. It usually occurs during the winter months. Most people will have some pre-existing immunity to it, and effective vaccines against infection are produced each season as the virus is identified.
- **Pandemic flu** is a global outbreak of a new flu virus that is easily and quickly transmitted from person to person. Most people will not have pre-existing immunity, and a vaccine may not be available for 4 to 6 months after the virus is identified. A moderate pandemic flu causes more widespread and severe illness than seasonal flu. A severe pandemic flu, caused by a more severe strain of virus, may result in widespread loss of life. (See **Table 1** for more information on the relative impact of seasonal and pandemic flu on families and communities.)

Table 1: The Impact of Flu on Families and Communities^{1, 5-7}

	SEASONAL FLU	MODERATE PANDEMIC FLU	SEVERE PANDEMIC FLU
Symptoms	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Fever • Headache • Extreme tiredness • Dry cough • Sore throat • Runny/stuffy nose • Muscle aches • Stomach ailments • Chills and sweating 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Worsening of seasonal flu symptoms • Bacterial pneumonia • Ear infections • Sinus infections • Dehydration 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Pneumonia • Hemorrhaging of the lungs • Eye infections • Severe respiratory distress • Worsening of pre-existing medical conditions • Death
Personal and Family Impact	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Moderate risk of getting flu • Very unlikely that a family member will need hospitalization • Extremely low risk that a family member will die from flu • Few absences from school or work 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • High risk of getting flu • Unlikely that a family member will need hospitalization • Low risk that a family member will die from flu • Loss of income from work closures or absence due to flu • Cancellation of school and recreational activities • Some isolation from normal social interactions 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Very high risk of getting flu • Very possible that a family member will need hospitalization • Moderate risk that a family member will die from flu • Schools and businesses closed • Mandatory quarantines • Families confined to home for extended periods • Prolonged social isolation • Rationing of food and water supply • Possible panic
Community Impact	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Low incidence of hospitalizations and death • Elderly, infants, and people with pre-existing medical conditions are at greater risk • Adequate vaccines, medicines, hospital beds, and breathing support available for people with flu 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Brief closures of schools and businesses • Increased absence rates from work and schools • Some local shortages of food and supplies • Shortages of vaccines, medicines, hospital beds, and breathing support for people with flu • Health care facilities flooded with increase in patients 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Closures of schools and businesses • Closures of public services such as financial institutions and public transportation • Prolonged isolation of people in the community • Food and water scarcities • Mass casualties • Extreme shortages of vaccines, medicines, hospital beds, and breathing support for people with flu • Health care facilities overwhelmed
Media coverage	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Typically receives little media coverage • Focus is on getting flu shots 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Reports on number of flu cases and deaths • Announcements of school and business closures • Increased coverage as outbreak spreads 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • International coverage • Reports on illness and death • Reports of impact on people, communities, businesses, and other organizations

Readiness: Preparing your Family for Pandemic Flu

One of the best ways to lessen the impact of pandemic flu on your family is to be prepared. Here are some steps that you can take to be better prepared.

- Make sure family members get a seasonal flu shot every year. Unless vaccine is in short supply, all members 6 months of age and older are candidates for a flu shot.
- Have all family members practice preventive behaviors including frequent hand washing, avoiding close contact with people who are sick, staying at home when flu symptoms are present, and covering the mouth and nose with a tissue when coughing or sneezing.
- Keep basic health supplies on hand, such as soap, tissues, aspirin or acetaminophen, and a thermometer.
- Carefully discuss with your family what pandemic flu is, how it is contracted, and the possible dangers. Have this discussion in a comfortable environment and encourage family members to ask questions. You may want to have a separate discussion with young children in order to address specific fears or misconceptions.
- Have your family work together to gather supplies that might be needed during a pandemic flu. These include drinking water, canned food, prescription medicines, flashlights, batteries, and cash.
- Create a list of emergency telephone numbers and community resources that will be helpful during a pandemic flu, such as your family's schools and physicians, local utility companies, fire and police, the local Red Cross and Salvation Army, and your community mental health center.
- Develop a plan for maintaining contact with friends and family members via telephone and Internet in the event of a pandemic flu. Prepare for possible disruption of telephone, Internet, and cell phone services, and interruption of other utilities including electricity.

Additional information about preparing your family for pandemic flu is available from:

The Centers for Disease Control and Prevention
(<http://www.pandemicflu.gov>)

The American Red Cross
(<http://www.redcross.org/pandemicflu>)

The Trust for America's Health
(<http://healthyamericans.org/pandemic-flu/>)

Information for children on pandemic flu and its prevention is available from:

The National Institute of Environmental Health Sciences' Kids' Pages
(<http://kids.niehs.nih.gov/pandemic.htm>)

The National Sanitation Foundation's Scrub Club
(<http://www.scrubclub.org>),
which includes an interactive "flu game"
(<http://www.scrubclub.org/site/flugame.aspx>)

Response: Coping with the Stress of a Pandemic Flu

Even if your family is prepared, a pandemic flu may be very stressful. To help your family cope with this stress, follow these recommendations:

- Stay updated about what is happening with the flu by getting information from credible media outlets, local public health authorities, and updates from public health websites.
- Seek support from friends and family by talking to them on the telephone or communicating through e-mail.
- Even if your family is isolated or quarantined, be sure to maintain a healthy diet and exercise.
- Although you need to stay informed, minimize exposure to television news or other information that might promote stress or panic. Be particularly aware of (and limit) how much media coverage your children are watching.
- E-mail and instant messages may be good ways to stay in contact with others during a pandemic flu, but the Internet may also have the most sensational flu coverage and may be full of rumors. Make sure your children are not exposed to this content while on the Internet.
- Keep your family's schedule consistent when it comes to bedtimes, meals, and exercise.
- Make time to do things at home that have made you and your family feel better in other stressful situations, such as resting, reading, watching movies, listening to music, playing games, exercising, or engaging in religious activities.
- Support children and other family members by encouraging questions and helping them understand the situation, praising good behavior, talking about feelings and helping family members express their feelings through drawing or other activities, and creating household jobs or activities that involve all family members.
- Have children participate in distance learning opportunities that may be offered by their schools or other institutions/organizations.
- Recognize that feelings such as grief, guilt, loneliness, boredom, fear of contracting disease, anxiety, stress, and panic are normal reactions to a stressful situation.
- Modify your goals to meet the current reality of the situation, and focus on what you can accomplish.
- Shift expectations and priorities to focus on what gives you meaning, purpose, or fulfillment.
- Attempt to control self-defeating statements, or replace them with more helpful thoughts.
- Give yourself small breaks from the stress of the situation.

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Your children may respond differently to a pandemic flu depending on their ages. **Table 2**, below, lists some of the reactions you may see in children of various ages, and the best ways you can respond.

Table 2: Helping Children Cope		
AGE GROUP	REACTIONS	HOW TO HELP
Preschool (ages 1-5)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Fear of darkness, bad dreams • Speech difficulties • Loss of bladder/bowel control, constipation, bed-wetting • Change in appetite 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Allow short-term changes in sleep arrangements • Plan calming, comforting activities before bedtime • Maintain regular family routines • Encourage expression through play, reenactment, storytelling • Provide reassurance (verbal and physical) • Limit media exposure
Early Childhood (ages 5-11)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Irritability, whining, aggressive behavior • Clinging, nightmares • Withdrawal from peers, loss of interest • Competition for parents' attention 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Be as patient and tolerant and possible • Relax expectations at home • Give children structured but undemanding chores/responsibilities • Set gentle but firm limits • Encourage expression through play and conversation • Schedule play sessions and time to stay in touch with friends through telephone and Internet • Discuss the pandemic flu and encourage questions • Limit media exposure
Preadolescent (ages 11-14)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Sleep/appetite disturbances • Rebellion in the home • School problems • Loss of interest • Physical problems 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Encourage children to stay in touch with friends through telephone and the Internet • Relax expectations at home • Give children structured but undemanding responsibilities • Give children additional individual attention • Encourage expression through discussion and conversation • Limit media exposure
Adolescent (ages 14-18)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Physical symptoms (headaches, rashes, etc.) • Sleep/appetite disturbance • Agitation or decrease in energy, apathy • Delinquent/irresponsible behavior 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Encourage resumption of routines • Encourage discussion of flu experience with peers, family (but do not force) • Encourage teens to stay in touch with friends through telephone and the Internet • Reduce expectations • Limit media exposure

Coping with Grief

Surely the greatest threat from a pandemic flu is loss of life. If you are careful and follow flu precautions you can greatly decrease the likelihood of illness and death, but if the worst happens and a loved one dies, you are likely to experience significant grief. You may experience the following states as you grieve:

- Sadness
- Anger
- Withdrawal from social activities
- Decreased desire to go about daily activities
- Decreased ability to carry on with daily routines
- Decrease ability to connect with others
- Decreased ability to find meaning in life
- Acceptance of loss after a period of mourning

While grief is natural, you should find positive ways to cope with your feelings. Here are several helpful actions:

- Reach out to your friends and family and talk to them about your loss. Use telephones and e-mail to communicate if necessary
- Seek religious/spiritual help or professional counseling (this may be available online or by telephone during a pandemic flu)
- Find outlets for your feelings such as writing, drawing, exercising, blogging, and any other relaxing activity
- Stay engaged with daily activities or projects
- Avoid turning to destructive behaviors such as excessive drinking, overeating, or drug use

Additional information on how children cope with trauma and grief is available from:

The National Child Traumatic Stress Network
(http://www.nctsn.org/nccts/nav.do?pid=typ_tg)

If you experience feelings of grief for longer than 6 months, you should seek the help of a mental health professional to rule out other problems. Unfortunately, it may be difficult to access mental health services in-person during a pandemic. If this is the case, you should still try to contact local mental health providers who offer counseling by telephone or the Internet. Consult your local mental health association, community mental health centers, or other local mental health professionals to find out what services are available in your area.

Recovery: When to Seek Professional Help

If you or your loved ones experience significant distress or trouble coping with problems associated with the pandemic flu, you may benefit from professional mental health treatment. Symptoms or reactions to be aware of include:

- Loss of sleep, frequent nightmares, or disruptive and intrusive thoughts
- Feelings of depression or inability to participate in normal activities
- Disorientation, extreme memory difficulties, or losing awareness of time
- A previously diagnosed mental health condition that may be recurring or worsening
- Inability to care for self (eating, bathing, or handling daily life)

Remember, during a pandemic it may be difficult to access professional mental health services in-person. If this is the case, you should still try to contact local mental health providers who are offering help over the telephone or through the Internet. Consult your local mental health association, community mental health centers, or other local mental health professionals to find out what services are available in your area.

References

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Established by Congress in 2000, the National Child Traumatic Stress Network (NCTSN) is a unique collaboration of academic and community-based service centers whose mission is to raise the standard of care and increase access to services for traumatized children and their families across the United States. Combining knowledge of child development, expertise in the full range of child traumatic experiences, and attention to cultural perspectives, the NCTSN serves as a national resource for developing and disseminating evidence-based interventions, trauma-informed services, and public and professional education.

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