

DIMINISHING THE ANXIETY OF PANDEMIC INFLUENZA

What is Pandemic Influenza?

The Ohio Department of Health defines pandemic influenza as the international circulation of a new influenza strain for which most of the world's population has no immunity (resistance). There were three pandemics in the 20th century (1918, 1957, 1968). These have tended to last about a year during which time humans build antibodies to counter the particular strain of virus. Experts agree another influenza pandemic will come, but no one can predict when. Of recent concern is the outbreak of H5N1 (avian flu) among birds in various parts of the world.

Avian Flu

Various species of animals are capable of hosting a range of viruses. H5N1 is a Type A virus that can cause death to many species of birds, including domesticated fowl. The outbreak of H5N1 in portions of Asia and Eastern Europe has resulted in the culling of millions of birds as authorities attempt to stem the spread of the infection. Although nearly 200 human deaths have resulted from H5N1 exposure, these appear to have been caused by direct exposure to infected birds or their biological residue.

The greatest risk to humans is the possible mutation of the H5N1 virus, enabling it to be transmitted from person to person. Having had no prior exposure to H5N1, the human immune system has no antibodies to effectively combat the virus. A mutated H5N1 virus could spread among humans much more rapidly than in previous pandemics due to our contemporary ease of travel. Although **there has been no documentation of sustained human-to-human transmission of H5N1, the time is right to prepare for the possibility.**

What is Being Done to Prepare?

Local, state, national and international governmental entities have begun preparations to address a potential pandemic. These preparations include developing and distributing anti-viral agents; destroying animals that might be infected; developing quarantine, isolation and medical surge plans; and even calling for the military to enforce such measures.

How Would Behavioral Health Be Impacted by an Outbreak?

After the news of a pandemic influenza outbreak, behavioral health symptoms will be shared by large portions of the population. Disorders of mood, cognition and behavior (fear, anxiety, panic, and grief) will be among the common findings in populations exposed, or thought to be exposed. Although symptoms may result from exposure to infection, similar symptoms may result from the mere perception of exposure or anxiety precipitated by fear of infection and death.

The "worried well" -- those who, in extreme cases, unconsciously adopt symptoms associated with the infections - - are likely to cause part of the medical surge in a pandemic outbreak. At the same time, those who are infected and symptomatic may use defense mechanisms to avoid seeking treatment. Behavioral health outreach services are particularly important to this group.

Medical personnel and public health officials will likely be the first responders to a pandemic influenza outbreak, and their mere presence may cause confusion and fear among persons more accustomed to seeing police, fire and military first responders. Medical personnel and public officials are not immune to the infection itself nor to the phenomenon of being "worried well." Clear, consistent, reliable and repetitive messages from trusted sources can diminish public uncertainty about the symptoms that might otherwise prompt persons to seek unnecessary treatment.

Behavioral health (alcohol, drug and mental health) is a vital component of a coordinated response to a potential pandemic. In particular, appropriate behavioral health messages can help curb the medical surge expected to follow an outbreak. Although there will be reliable national sources of information, people tend to rely most on trusted local sources. Clinicians trained in the Ohio All Hazards Behavioral Health Curriculum are prepared to provide stabilization and outreach services. In addition, they are capable of "triaging" those persons possibly in need of clinical intervention. Ensure that your local behavioral health partners are active in the All Hazards initiative and the local agency Emergency Management Agency.

What to Expect if There is an Outbreak

Most information on the behavioral health impact of a global pandemic is drawn from research on smaller scale epidemics, such as Severe Acute Respiratory Syndrome (SARS) outbreaks, and shares many of the characteristics of a bio-terrorist event. The unique characteristics include:

Postponed effect

- Unlike hurricanes or other natural disasters that occur, cause damage, and then dissipate; a pandemic would become known only by its consequences.
- There is a lag time between the exposure to infection and the development of first symptoms.

Invisibility

- People experiencing disaster generally act responsibly because they have sensory cues that enable them to assess the threat and plan their responses. In a pandemic there are no such sensory cues.
- The very idea of infection caused by invisible agents is perhaps the most intimidating and terrifying aspect of a pandemic.
- Human defenses are strongest when there is a visible, identified, evil perpetrator. Facing an invisible agent, there may be a tendency to project blame on more tangible agents such as government, birds, or a presumed single source of the contagion.

Uncertainty

- Not everyone exposed will develop the full range of symptoms.
- The development of antibodies is a slow process with no distinct point in time when immunity would be developed.

Self-expanding / contagion

- As with bioterrorism, there is no self-limiting event (e.g., explosion). If the infection is not halted, the harmful biological agent remains active and virulent.
- Those infected may be stigmatized.
- Friends, family and those helping may also be a source of contagion.
- Ethical conflicts are faced by responders who risk becoming infected while performing their roles of caring for the ill.
- Quarantine and isolation used to stem the spread of the infection create a range of social issues and exacerbate “normal” stress responses of withdrawal and isolation.
- Some who were infected and symptomatic may use the defense mechanisms of denial and minimization to avoid seeking treatment. Behavioral health outreach services are particularly important to this group.

Tips for Preparing for and Responding to an Outbreak

It's important to understand what you can do to maximize your feelings of safety and well-being. Steps you can take to protect yourself and your family include:

- Develop family and business preparedness plans.
- Get an influenza vaccine.
- Cover your cough / wash your hands regularly.
- Keep a 72-hour supply of food and medical needs.
- Rely on sound information from the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, World Health Organization or local public health authorities.
- Limit your exposure to media sources. Find one or two good news sources and check them regularly.
- Find alternate ways to do normal activities if isolation is necessary.
- Be aware of possible signs of a behavioral health issue and know where to turn if help is needed. Understand that profound sadness, grief and anger are normal reactions to abnormal events. If warning signs are serious or persist, seek assistance from a counselor or other behavioral health professional.

Online Resources

Ohio Association of County Behavioral Health Authorities
www.oacbha.org
National Pandemic Flu Web site
pandemicflu.gov
Ohio Department of Health
www.odh.ohio.gov
Ohio Department of Mental Health
www.mh.state.oh.us
Ohio Department of Alcohol and Drug Addiction Services
www.odadas.state.oh.us
World Health Organization
www.who.int
American Psychiatric Association
www.psych.org
Ohio Council of Behavioral Healthcare Providers
www.ohiocouncil-bhp.org

Sources: American Journal of Psychiatry
Ohio Department of Health
Ohio Department of Mental Health
U.S. National Library of Medicine