



WHETHER BIRD OR SWINE FLU  
*Are you prepared?*

**FOUR YEARS AGO, THE TERM PANDEMIC INFLUENZA** became part of our everyday vernacular. The pandemic pandemonium was triggered by the H5N1 influenza virus or bird flu that was spreading from birds to humans on a limited basis in parts of Asia. The severity of this particular strain raised concern with health officials as H5N1 began to appear sporadically in other parts of the world. Health officials began to emphasize that the world should brace for the first possible pandemic influenza of the 21<sup>st</sup> century.

### What is pandemic influenza?

It is a global influenza outbreak, where everyone is susceptible. It occurs when there is a novel human influenza A subtype, which causes serious illness and spreads easily from human-to-human. The H5N1 virus does not spread easily from human-to-human. The lack of transmission provided the world time to plan for the possible crippling effects of a pandemic. The World Health Organization (WHO) in an effort to assist with pandemic planning developed a six-phased alert system that would signal the eminence of a pandemic. The United States and many European countries produced checklists, which serve as a springboard for pandemic planning, based on these phases. The question everyone began to wonder was whether we were prepared? This topic was debated nightly in the news, and numerous conferences were held to assist people with planning.

### As Bird Flu Frenzy Subsides, Swine Flu Emerges

However, as the WHO pandemic alert level remained constant, the stories regarding H5N1 became intermittent, and slowly pandemic pandemonium died down. People began to place pandemic planning to the side until the spring of this year when an outbreak of a novel influenza virus caught some by surprise—swine flu. A few sporadic cases of swine flu or H1N1 had been identified in the United States, while an almost silent epidemic was building in Mexico. It was not until about 75 students at a New York school fell ill did the world take notice.

It seemed within days of the increased attention, the virus had spread rapidly within Mexico and parts of the U.S.

### WHO Alert Levels Quickly Climb

Quickly, health officials around the world moved from scenario development

to response and mitigation. On April 26, 2009, the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services (HHS) issued the first of several nationwide public health emergency declarations. A day later the European Health Union advised Europeans to postpone non-essential travel to the U.S. and Mexico. Within weeks the WHO alert level that had remained stagnant moved from three to five. By June, the WHO declared that a global pandemic of H1N1 flu was underway.

### FDA Approves Four Vaccines for H1N1

To mitigate the spread of the virus, vaccine development became essential. The U.S. Food and Drug Administration (FDA) announced the approval of four vaccines on September 15. The European Medicines Agency (EMA) approved two vaccines for pandemic influenza on September 25. Health officials determined that certain priority groups who are at higher risk of medical complications from influenza should receive the vaccine first. Those groups comprise healthcare workers, pregnant women, caregivers for children younger than six months, people ages six months to 24 years-old, and persons aged 25 through 64 years old who have health conditions with certain medical conditions.

As of October 25, worldwide there have been more than 440,000 laboratory confirmed cases of pandemic influenza. These numbers do not reflect actual progression of the disease as some countries have stopped testing every case. Worldwide, the WHO attributes 5,700 deaths to the virus since April 2009. As H1N1 continues to spread, it is important to note that we all play a vital role in mitigating the spread of the disease. The keys to mitigation are vaccination of priority groups, robust hand-washing practices by everyone and people staying at home when sick. Continued vigilance by all is necessary to ensure a healthy population. ☞



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## RESOURCES

- U.S. - [www.pandemicflu.gov](http://www.pandemicflu.gov)
- Global - [www.who.int/csr/disease/swineflu/en/index.html](http://www.who.int/csr/disease/swineflu/en/index.html)
- Europe - <http://www.emea.europa.eu/influenza/home.html>
- PPTA - <http://www.pptapandemicinfo.org>

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