PANDEMIC INFLUENZA
FREQUENTLY ASKED QUESTIONS

WHAT IS PANDEMIC INFLUENZA?
Pandemic influenza is influenza (flu) that spreads rapidly causing widespread epidemics around the world. Pandemic influenza occurs when a new, highly infectious strain of the influenza virus occurs.

WHAT IS THE DIFFERENCE BETWEEN AN EPIDEMIC AND A PANDEMIC?
A pandemic occurs over large geographical areas (usually worldwide) and affects a high proportion of the population. An epidemic, although also serious, usually refers to what is happening in one country or region.

IS ANOTHER PANDEMIC OF INFLUENZA LIKELY?
Flu viruses are constantly changing and adapting, so it is likely that viruses sufficiently different from circulating strains will emerge from time to time. There were three in the last century. The most serious was in 1918, killing millions of people worldwide. Smaller pandemics happened in 1957 and 1968.

WHEN IS THE NEXT PANDEMIC DUE?
We do not know – it can’t be predicted. The time periods between previous pandemics have varied widely (11 to 42 years) with no recognizable pattern.

HOW PREDICTABLE WILL THE EFFECTS OF A PANDEMIC BE?
Every pandemic is different so we cannot be sure how a new pandemic will behave. Predictions are made based on information from past pandemics.

WILL IT ARRIVE IN WINTER LIKE NORMAL FLU?
Not necessarily. A new virus may not follow the usual seasonal pattern of flu. It could occur any time of year.

HOW LONG WILL IT TAKE TO SPREAD TO BERMUDA?
Once the pandemic emerges in another part of the world it will probably take less than six months and possibly just a few weeks to reach Bermuda. The increasing speed and volume of modern air travel means infectious diseases can travel very rapidly around the globe.

HOW WILL A NEW VIRUS BE DETECTED?
Scientists in an international network of laboratories, coordinated by the World Health Organization (WHO) are watching for it all the time. This network provides a mechanism for monitoring flu viruses around the world, detecting the emergence of influenza viruses with pandemic potential, and alerting other countries.

HOW WILL WE KNOW WHEN A PANDEMIC IS POSSIBLE?
A pandemic is possible when a new strain of influenza has not only been identified but also causing illness and has started spreading from one person to another.

CAN IT BE PREVENTED AT THIS STAGE?
International effort will be put to trying to control a pandemic at this early stage. However, influenza is highly infectious and because whole populations will be susceptible to the new virus, despite people’s best effort it is likely to continue to spread.

HOW WILL WE KNOW WHEN A PANDEMIC IS ABOUT TO HAPPEN?
A pandemic will be considered imminent when a new virus has shown it can spread easily between people. In practice, this means when a new strain of the virus has been identified as the cause of chains of illness passed from one person to another or illness in more than one country with no obvious links.

WHAT CAN WE EXPECT TO HAPPEN?
Once the pandemic reaches Bermuda it may cause widespread illness across the country over a period of 1-2 months. There may be a second wave of illness a few weeks or months later. Previous experience suggests around a quarter of the population will develop flu during this time, although it could be more. Everyone will be susceptible due to a lack of immunity to the new virus.

HOW WILL THIS IMPACT HEALTH SERVICES?
A flu pandemic will place considerable pressure on health and social services due to the greatly increased number of persons with influenza who will require treatment coupled with depletion of workforce due to illness.
**HOW WILL THIS IMPACT BUSINESSES?**

Businesses will be impacted by the depletion of the workforce due to illness. Absences may be compounded by the need for some workers to care for family members. Businesses may also be impacted by disruptions to resources and supplies.

**WILL SCHOOLS BE AFFECTED?**

Pandemic flu is likely to spread rapidly in schools, so they may have to close. Some may have to close for short periods because of staff shortages. This, in turn, will affect working parents who may need to stay at home to care for their children. Closing schools will, therefore, have an impact on business continuity and the maintenance of essential services. Decisions such as whether to close schools as a measure to try to slow the spread of the pandemic will be taken at the time.

**WILL OTHER SECTORS OF THE COMMUNITY BE AFFECTED?**

Pandemic flu will impact on all services including police, fire, prisons, utilities, food and fuel supply, etc. All are likely to be affected due to staff shortages, disruptions in local and international transport, etc.

**WHAT ARE THE SYMPTOMS OF PANDEMIC FLU?**

Symptoms are similar to, but may be more severe than, symptoms for seasonal flu – sudden onset of fever, cough, headache, extreme tiredness and aching muscles, and respiratory symptoms such as sore throat.

**HOW CAN I REDUCE MY RISK AND PROTECT MYSELF AND MY 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 – avoid using your hands for this purpose
- Disposing of dirty tissues promptly and carefully
- Avoiding non-essential travel and large crowds whenever possible
- Maintaining good basic hygiene, for example washing your hands frequently
- Cleaning hard surfaces frequently

**PREVENTION AND TREATMENT**

**WILL A VACCINE BE AVAILABLE TO PREVENT ILLNESS IN A PANDEMIC?**

Vaccines can play an important role in responding to an influenza pandemic but because the virus will be entirely new and not predictable a specific vaccine cannot be made in advance. Preparatory work is being undertaken to be in the best possible position to produce vaccine against a pandemic strain when the situation arises, but they are unlikely to be available in the early stages.

**WHY CAN’T WE USE THE CURRENTLY AVAILABLE FLU VACCINE?**

Currently available flu vaccines only protect against the currently circulating seasonal flu. The virus causing the pandemic will be so different from the strains in the seasonal vaccine that they are very unlikely to provide any significant immunity in a pandemic situation.

**CAN’T WE ANTICIPATE WHAT VIRUSES MIGHT CAUSE A PANDEMIC AND MAKE A VACCINE?**

Before a pandemic starts it is difficult, if not impossible, to predict what strain will cause it and even then, predictions may prove wrong or the predicted virus may have changed enough for a pre-prepared vaccine to be ineffective.

**WILL BERMUDA BE ABLE TO OBTAIN VACCINE FOR ITS RESIDENTS?**

Bermuda is discussing its needs for vaccines with external agencies. However, it is very unlikely enough vaccine can be produced and distributed for everyone to be immunized before the first wave of illness due to the pandemic strain.

**DOES THIS MEAN THAT THE VACCINE WILL BE RATIONED?**

When vaccine is available, priority will be given to certain groups first. Healthcare workers and other essential service key workers will need to take precedence over other groups as it will be important to maintain health and other essential services. Those groups most at risk for serious illness and complications will then receive the vaccine as supplies increase, followed by the general population.
**WHAT ABOUT ANTIVIRAL AGENTS?**
Antiviral agents can be used to prevent and/or treat influenza but again, until the virus starts circulating, it is not possible to know how effective the antivirals will be or the best way to use them. Proper use of antivirals is important especially during the time before a vaccine becomes available.

**DOES BERMUDA HAVE STOCKPILES OF ANTIVIRAL AGENTS?**
Bermuda is discussing its needs for antiviral agents with external agencies.

**WILL THEY BE RECOMMENDED FOR ALL GROUPS OF THE POPULATION?**
During a pandemic, antivirals will have to be used in the most effective way, taking into account emerging evidence about the pandemic and the effectiveness of the drugs, any side effects or complications, and their availability. Some groups of people will, therefore, take priority over others.

**ARE THERE ANY OTHER COUNTERMEASURES AVAILABLE?**
Since vaccines and antiviral drugs are likely to be in limited supply, especially at the onset of a pandemic, other public health and social interventions may be the only available countermeasures to limit or slow the spread of the pandemic virus. Measures include hand washing, covering your cough, limiting non-essential travel and mass gatherings of people.

**WHY WON’T ANTIBIOTICS WORK?**
Antibiotics are used to treat bacterial infections. Influenza is a virus so antibiotics will not work. However, antibiotics may be used to treat a secondary bacterial infection.

**THE PANDEMIC PLAN**

**WHAT CONTINGENCY PLANS DOES BERMUDA HAVE IN PLACE FOR AN INFLUENZA PANDEMIC?**
Bermuda has a draft contingency plan. The plan provides the overall framework for an integrated response, escalating as the pandemic threat increases and then as the pandemic evolves. At its simplest it covers actions to be taken before, during and after the pandemic. The plan is intended to be flexible so that the response can be adapted as a pandemic evolves and knowledge about the new virus, its impact and the effectiveness of available countermeasures becomes available.

**WHAT WOULD BERMUDA DO IF PANDEMIC FLU ARRIVES?**
If the pandemic starts outside Bermuda, the government would have already put its plan into action and started preparing Bermuda for the pandemic. A graduated series of public health measures would be implemented to reduce the impact and help control the pandemic.

**WHAT ARE THE OBJECTIVES OF THE PLAN?**
The overall aim of the plan is to minimize the impact of the pandemic on Bermuda’s population. In particular the objectives of the plan are to:
- Reduce sickness and deaths
- Provide health care for the ill
- Ensure continuity of essential services
- Ensure persons have access to up-to-date and comprehensive information

**WHAT ARE THE KEY ELEMENTS OF THE PLAN?**
The key elements of the pandemic plan include:
- Establishing ‘command and control’ structure to lead and co-ordinate the response
- Communications
- Surveillance to monitor the pandemic (locally and internationally)
- The public health response
- The health services response
- Preparatory work to support the responses

**WHAT CONTROL MEASURES MAY BE PUT IN PLACE?**
- Vaccination of identified high-risk groups as and when vaccine becomes available
- Use of antiviral drugs
- Appropriate advice about the use of healthcare services
- Appropriate advice to public on how to stay well
- Other ‘social’ measures to reduce person to person spread such as limits on large gatherings, isolation and quarantine as warranted
**AVIAN FLU**

**WHAT IS BIRD FLU?**
Avian influenza or ‘bird flu’ is a contagious disease of animals caused by viruses that normally infect only birds. Through close contact with infected poultry, humans may become infected.

**HOW DO PEOPLE BECOME INFECTED?**
Direct contact with infected poultry or surfaces and objects contaminated by their faeces is presently considered the main route of human infection.

**WHAT ARE THE SYMPTOMS OF AVIAN INFLUENZA IN PEOPLE?**
The symptoms are similar to that of other forms of influenza, including fever, sore throat, cough, headache and muscle aches & pains.

**WHAT SHOULD I DO IF I HAVE ANY OF THESE SYMPTOMS?**
Many people get respiratory infections every day and the probability that your symptoms are from avian influenza is extremely low. If you have just returned from Asia and you are experiencing any of the symptoms outlined above, you should seek medical advice advising them of your recent travel and activities, including any visits to farms or markets in Asia. Remember your symptoms are highly unlikely to be caused by avian influenza.

**DOES THE VIRUS SPREAD EASILY FROM BIRDS TO HUMANS?**
No. Although more than 100 human cases have occurred, this is a small number compared with the huge number of birds affected and the numerous opportunities for human exposure.

**IS IT SAFE TO EAT POULTRY AND POULTRY PRODUCTS?**
Yes, providing they are properly cooked. Avian influenza is not transmitted through cooked food as the H5N1 virus is sensitive to heat. Normal cooking temperatures will kill the virus. Consumers should be sure that all parts of the poultry are fully cooked and that eggs too are properly cooked. To date, no evidence indicates that anyone has been infected following the consumption of properly cooked poultry or poultry products, even when those foods were contaminated with the H5N1 virus.

**WHY ARE WE CONCERNED ABOUT AVIAN FLU?**
With avian influenza now infecting poultry in different areas there is greater risk for human infection. Each additional human case gives the virus an opportunity to improve its transmissibility in humans and thus develop into a pandemic strain.

**IS THERE ‘BIRD FLU’ IN BERMUDA?**
There are no cases of bird flu in Bermuda, either in birds or in humans.

**SHOULD I AVOID TRAVEL TO NATIONS AFFECTED BY BIRD FLU?**
Currently, there are no travel restrictions in place pertaining to countries affected by outbreaks of bird flu. However there are travel advisories which state that persons visiting affected countries avoid poultry farms, as well as contact with animals in live food markets and areas contaminated by those animals or their feces.

**WHAT DO I DO IF I COME ACROSS A DEAD BIRD IN MY YARD?**
It is recommended that persons observe wild birds from a distance. If you encounter a diseased or dead bird, contact the Department of Environmental Protection. Dead birds may be placed in a plastic bag for disposal. This should be done without direct handling, i.e. using gloves and/or a plastic bag as a barrier between the bird and your skin. If you do make physical contact with birds do not eat, drink, smoke, or rub your eyes before cleaning your hands with soap and water.