

WHO declares H1N1 flu pandemic

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June 11, 2009 -- The World Health Organization scheduled a meeting today to declare a global H1N1 flu pandemic as confirmed cases of H1N1 virus continue to grow worldwide.

"What this would mean is that spread of the virus has continued and that activity has become established in at least two regions of the world," said Keiji Fukuda, the agency's assistant director-general of health security and environment. "It does not mean that the severity of the situation has increased and that people are getting seriously sick at higher numbers or higher rates than they are right now. This is a very important point for countries to understand."

By early Thursday morning, the health agency had recorded more than 27,700 cases in 74 countries, with 141 deaths. As of June 5, Pennsylvania had 626 confirmed and probable cases, with two deaths reported.

What is a Pandemic?

A pandemic is a global outbreak of disease that occurs when a new virus appears or "emerges" in the human population, causes serious illness, and then spreads easily from person to person worldwide. Pandemics are different from seasonal outbreaks or "epidemics" of influenza. Seasonal outbreaks are caused by subtypes of influenza viruses that already circulate among people, whereas pandemic outbreaks are caused by new subtypes, by subtypes that have never circulated among people, or by subtypes that have not circulated among people for a long time. Past pandemics have led to high levels of illness, death, social disruption, and economic loss.

H1N1 background

Novel influenza A (H1N1) is a new flu virus of swine origin that was first detected in Mexico and the United States in March and April, 2009. The first novel H1N1 patient in the United States was

confirmed by laboratory testing at CDC on April 15, 2009. The second patient was confirmed on April 17, 2009. It was quickly determined that the virus was spreading from person-to-person. On April 22, CDC activated its Emergency Operations Center to better coordinate the public health response. On April 26, 2009, the United States Government declared a public health emergency.

It's thought that novel influenza A (H1N1) flu spreads in the same way that regular seasonal influenza viruses spread; mainly through the coughs and sneezes of people who are sick with the virus.

Since the outbreak began in the United States, an increasing number of U.S. states have reported cases of novel H1N1 influenza with associated hospitalizations and deaths. By June 3, 2009, all 50 states in the United States and the District of Columbia and Puerto Rico were reporting cases of novel H1N1 infection. While nationwide [U.S. influenza surveillance systems](#) indicate that overall influenza activity is decreasing in the country at this time, novel H1N1 outbreaks are ongoing in parts of the U.S., in some cases with intense activity.

It's uncertain at this time how serious or severe this novel H1N1 virus will be in terms of how many people infected will develop serious complications or die or how this new virus may affect the U.S. during its upcoming influenza season in the fall and winter. Because this is a new virus, most people will have little or no immunity against it, and illness may be more severe and widespread as a result. In addition, currently there is no vaccine to protect against this novel H1N1 virus. CDC anticipates that there will be more cases, more hospitalizations and more deaths associated with this new virus.

At this time, most people who have become ill with novel H1N1 in the United States have recovered without requiring medical treatment and have experienced typical flu symptoms.

CDC is continuing to watch the situation carefully, to support the public health response and to gather information about this virus and its characteristics.

Testing

CDC has developed a PCR diagnostic test kit to detect this novel H1N1 virus and has now distributed test kits to all states in the U.S. and the District of Columbia and Puerto Rico. The test kits are being shipped internationally as well. This will allow states and other countries to test for this new virus.

Vaccine

The U.S. Government is aggressively taking early steps in the process to manufacture a novel H1N1 vaccine, working closely with manufacturing. CDC has isolated the new H1N1 virus, made a candidate

vaccine virus that can be used to create vaccine, and has provided this virus to industry so they can begin scaling up for production of a vaccine, if necessary. Making vaccine is a multi-step process requiring several months to complete.

Strategic National Stockpile

CDC has deployed 25 percent of the supplies in the Strategic National Stockpile (SNS) to all states in the continental United States and U.S. territories. This included antiviral drugs, personal protective equipment, and respiratory protection devices. These supplies and medicines will help states and U.S. territories respond to novel H1N1 virus.

Editors note: Information used in the story came from the CDC, WHO and PA DEP.