

Flu Preparedness

With increasing press coverage of avian flu, greater attention is being paid to flu preparedness in general. Seasonal flu, avian flu, and pandemic flu require different levels of preparation. This document provides information and links to valuable resources to assist midwives in managing seasonal flu and in preparing for a flu outbreak or pandemic.

Seasonal flu

Seasonal flu is contagious respiratory illness caused by influenza viruses that pass from human to human. Most humans have developed some natural immunity to seasonal flu viruses, and vaccines are available. Information on seasonal flu directed towards the public and health professionals is available on the CDC web site: <http://www.cdc.gov/flu/>. The resources for health professionals are updated regularly, with influenza vaccine bulletins in the fall and with surveillance information weekly from October through May. A variety of fact sheets (i.e., “What to do if you get sick”) are provided in PDF format for download and are a valuable resource for client education.

Avian Influenza (Bird flu)

Avian or bird flu refers to the group of infectious diseases caused by type-A influenza strains that occur among birds. Various subtypes occur, of which the H5 and H7 subtypes are the most virulent (H5N1 is the avian flu strain currently spreading around the world). While virulent avian flu viruses can be highly destructive to bird populations, they very rarely cross the species barrier, as these viruses must undergo multiple mutations in order to become transmissible from human to human. Only 10 occasions in which bird flu has crossed into human populations have been documented since 1959, all involving only 4 strains of the virus. However, the H5N1 strain of bird flu is alarming because of its particularly dangerous characteristics: it is highly pathogenic, it has sickened and killed humans who have come into contact with infected birds, and it has the potential to mutate and become transmissible from human to human, launching a flu pandemic. Once transmissible among humans, bird flu is often deadly, since human populations have no natural immunity to these diseases. Thus, public health professionals are preparing for the potential threat of pandemic bird flu. The World Health Organization (WHO) website http://www.who.int/csr/disease/avian_influenza/updates/en/index.html maintains [situation updates](#) and [cumulative reports of human cases](#) of avian influenza A (H5N1).

Pandemic flu

Pandemic flu occurs when a virulent flu strain that can spread easily from human to human causes a global outbreak, or pandemic, of serious illness. Responding to the threat of potential H5N1 avian flu mutation and spread among humans, national and global organizations around the world are working to develop and coordinate flu preparedness plans to address the threat of pandemic avian influenza.

The World Health Organization (WHO) has developed a recommended strategic action plan to respond to pandemic flu, outlining actions in the pre-pandemic, emerging, and declared stages of a global flu outbreak. This document defines the stages of a pandemic, outlines the role of WHO, and makes recommendations for national measures before and during a pandemic:

http://www.who.int/csr/resources/publications/influenza/WHO_CDS_CSR_GIP_05_8-EN.pdf

The U.S. government Department of Health and Human Services has created a web site containing information on pandemic and avian influenza, www.pandemicflu.gov. This site contains general information about flu, planning and response activities at federal, state, and local levels, links to resources on flu preparedness, and lists of meetings and conferences being held to help public health officials, health care providers, business and community leaders address pandemic flu preparedness.

Understanding the Difference between Seasonal and Pandemic Flu

The official U.S. government website on pandemic influenza also provides a chart comparing seasonal and pandemic flu. http://www.pandemicflu.gov/season_or_pandemic.html

Flu Preparedness for Childbearing Women and Infants

Because pregnant women and infants are at increased risk of flu-related complications, the Advisory Committee on Immunization Practices (ACIP) recommends that all pregnant women and infants 6-23 months of age be vaccinated with the inactivated vaccine against seasonal influenza. Vaccination can occur in any trimester of pregnancy. In addition, breastfeeding women can receive this vaccine with no known adverse effects to their infants. The current vaccine is not FDA approved for infants <6 months of age, although this group is at the highest risk for flu-related complications. Vaccination of household contacts and all caregivers is recommended to reduce the risk of transmission to these infants. The ACIP recommendations are available from the CDC at <http://www.cdc.gov/mmwr/preview/mmwrhtml/rr5408a1.htm>.

In the case of a flu pandemic, ACNM is particularly concerned that plans be in place for appropriate care of the 4 million women who give birth each year. If an avian flu strain acquires the capability of human to human transmission and a flu pandemic ensues, outbreaks are expected to occur almost simultaneously in many localities around the globe. For this reason, each state and local government must be prepared to combat flu on site. The Department of Health and Human Services has allocated grants of at least \$500,000 to all 50 states and 7 territories, including Puerto Rico and the District of Columbia, to develop local flu preparedness plans and resources. Pandemic planning summits are being coordinated for public health and emergency response leaders in each state. More information about state and local efforts is available at <http://www.pandemicflu.gov/plan/tab2.html#intro>. ACNM strongly encourages CNMs/CMs to participate in state and local efforts to plan for pandemic flu in their jurisdictions, to guarantee that the needs of childbearing women and their infants are adequately addressed.

Other Resources

- Quickening November/December 2005: Preparing for the Bird Flu by Peg Marshall http://www.midwife.org/siteFiles/education/Bird_Flu_article.pdf
- ACNM is working with the White Ribbon Alliance (www.whiteribbonalliance.org) to address maternal and child health needs during emergencies such as pandemic flu.
- DeWald L & Fountain L. Introducing emergency preparedness in childbirth education classes. *Journal of Perinatal Education* 2006; 15(1): 49-51.

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The ACNM “*QuickInfo*” series was developed by the Department of Professional Services to respond to common inquiries, summarizing ACNM resources regarding a particular topic, as well as listing selected literature and a variety of other resources. Your feedback is welcomed; contact Professional Services at 240-485-1800 or info@acnm.org.