



# Pandemic influenza Fact Sheet

2016 Tasmanian State Natural Disaster Risk Assessment

## Influenza pandemics affect everyone

Influenza pandemics are rare and unpredictable. They affect everyone, causing widespread illness and disrupting communities, health services, workplaces and economies.

## What is influenza?

Influenza is a potentially serious infectious disease that spreads easily from person to person, particularly by coughs and sneezes. A person can spread influenza for up to a day before they become unwell. Illness usually starts suddenly, with fever, cough, tiredness and body aches. In Australia, influenza is usually seasonal (most common in winter), and contributes to over 2,500 deaths, mostly in elderly people and people with underlying medical conditions.

There are two main types of influenza virus – Influenza A and Influenza B. Both types change slightly from year to year, which is why the seasonal influenza vaccine is updated every year. Influenza A viruses can also undergo major changes. This is rare, but can result in substantially new Influenza A viruses not covered by existing vaccines and to which the global population is initially not immune. This may cause an influenza pandemic – a global outbreak that spreads quickly around the world, and may cause more illness and death than seasonal influenza, including among young and healthy people.

Influenza pandemics are different to other natural disasters. Even a mild pandemic may cause widespread illness and disrupt communities, health services and workplaces throughout Tasmania for months.

There have been four influenza pandemics in the last 100 years:

- the severe 1918–1919 Spanish Flu
- the mild–moderate 1957–1958 Asian Flu
- the mild–moderate 1968–1969 Hong Kong Flu
- the relatively mild 2009 H1N1 influenza ('swine flu').

## What about pandemics caused by other diseases?

Tasmania needs to be prepared for a range of disease threats, but influenza is the only likely cause of a pandemic of respiratory illness.

If we are prepared for pandemic influenza, we are reasonably prepared for other large and serious infectious disease outbreaks.

## Government, communities and individuals all have a role to play in preparing for pandemic influenza

### What is the Government doing?

Local and interstate health and pathology services are always looking for new strains of influenza that may cause pandemics. Global investigation of new influenza viruses is coordinated by the World Health Organization.

The *State Special Emergency Management Plan for Human Influenza Pandemic Emergencies* guides Tasmania's whole-of-government response to pandemic influenza, and the *Tasmanian Health Action Plan for Pandemic Influenza* (THAPPI) guides Tasmania's health response. THAPPI aligns with the *Australian Health Management Plan for Pandemic Influenza 2014*.

Business continuity planning to manage the risk of prolonged higher staff absenteeism is a focus of the Tasmanian Government's pandemic preparedness work.

### What you can do about pandemic flu?

Influenza pandemics cause harms across communities. Everyone can help prepare.

## What to do before, during and after a flu pandemic

### BEFORE

- Get immunized against seasonal influenza every year to reduce the burden of influenza on you, your workplace, the community, and health services.
- Help your workplace undertake business continuity planning for pandemic influenza. Plan to manage higher than normal staff absenteeism over several months. Think how staff absenteeism could affect service delivery, supply chains and areas of work that depend on few people with specialized knowledge, skill or qualifications ('key person dependencies'). For more on business continuity planning, go to [www.business.tas.gov.au/preparing\\_for\\_disasters/tools-and-checklists/checklist\\_-\\_influenza\\_pandemic\\_preparation](http://www.business.tas.gov.au/preparing_for_disasters/tools-and-checklists/checklist_-_influenza_pandemic_preparation).
- Know flu. Influenza is worse than a 'cold'. Influenza hits suddenly and you feel unwell all over. Key clues to flu are the sudden start, and fever, cough, body aches and tiredness.

### DURING

- Influenza can be a serious illness, but most people recover within a week or so, and then get back to normal activities.
- Follow advice from public health officials and your health care provider. Some decisions might be inconvenient for you but will help manage the impact of the pandemic on your community. For example, elective health procedures might be delayed, you may be asked to go to a special flu clinic instead of your GP and you may be asked to stay at home for a few days if you are ill.
- A new vaccine designed to provide protection against the pandemic influenza virus will probably become available several months into the pandemic.
- For the most up-to-date influenza pandemic information, visit [www.flupandemic.gov.au](http://www.flupandemic.gov.au) or TasALERT at <http://www.alert.tas.gov.au>.

### AFTER

- Influenza pandemics may cause waves of illness in communities over a few months. Public health officials will provide information on the progress of the pandemic, and advise when 'business as usual' is resuming.
- The strain of Influenza A virus that caused the pandemic will probably continue to circulate. It will usually be less common after the first year, and the effects will lessen as much of the population will be protected by having had the infection and/or a pandemic influenza vaccine.



For the most up-to-date information on pandemic influenza, go to [www.flupandemic.gov.au](http://www.flupandemic.gov.au) or the World Health Organization's website at [www.who.int/csr/disease/en/](http://www.who.int/csr/disease/en/)