

Q&As on the WHO Declaration of Pandemic Phase 6 for Novel H1N1 Flu

Pandemic Alert Level raised to Phase 6

What do the WHO phases mean?

The WHO phases are based on the geographical spread of a novel influenza virus. As “pandemic” means worldwide epidemic, a WHO Phase 6 means that the virus is spreading across the globe. What the WHO phases do NOT do is predict the severity of the virus.

Does WHO’s change to Phase 6 mean the virus is more severe?

No. It is important to understand that this change is based on the geographic spread of the virus to other parts of the world and does not necessarily reflect any change in the severity of the virus or associated illness.

So why did WHO move to Phase 6 if the virus severity is unchanged?

The move to Phase 6 is really an alert that the spread of the H1N1 virus is now expected to traverse the globe and those nations where the virus has yet to arrive should expect to eventually see cases and be prepared to respond.

What does the phase change mean for Alaska? What will Alaska do differently?

Here in Alaska, the virus has already begun spreading from person-to-person, so the announcement by WHO does not really change what we are already doing to respond.

In response to an influenza pandemic, governments, communities, workplaces and individuals will base the intensity of their efforts to reduce spread of the virus on the severity of the disease, as reflected by the number of deaths and hospitalizations from the virus.

Alaska has been responding to the H1N1 flu in a way that balances the health of our residents while minimizing disruption to the community. We will continue to provide guidance using the most current scientific data available about the H1N1 flu.

Regardless of what WHO calls or labels this, we are taking necessary and aggressive measures to protect the health of our residents out of an abundance of caution.

What actions has Alaska taken already?

Since the first reports of the appearance of novel H1N1 flu in the U.S., Alaska has been actively and aggressively implementing our pandemic response plan. We have distributed 20,000 courses of antiviral drugs statewide, we have begun the process of procuring a vaccine should it be needed, and

we have been routinely providing the latest information to assist health care providers, public health officials and the public in addressing the challenges posed by this newly-identified influenza virus.

Is the outbreak over in the U.S.? Alaska?

The only thing certain about flu viruses is uncertainty.

While the number of new cases in the U.S. may be waning, we are continuing to prepare for the possibility that the virus may return in the fall. We will continue to watch this virus carefully, especially in the Southern Hemisphere. Every day we learn more about this virus and its impact on human health. As we learn new information, we will adjust our responses and planning, and inform the public and continue to do all we can to make this outbreak less severe.

Is there anything individuals can do?

There are everyday common sense things that people must do to protect their health and lessen the spread of the novel H1N1 virus as well as seasonal flu viruses. Wash your hands and cover your mouth when you cough or sneeze. If you are sick — stay home, recover, and keep others well; avoid going to work or school; consider delaying travel plans; limit your contact with others; and stay informed. Be sure to visit www.pandemicflu.alaska.gov to get the latest information as it becomes available. You can also call the state Pan Flu information line at 1-888 9Panflu.

What does Phase 6 mean for H1N1 vaccine development and production?

Even before the WHO elevated the threat level to 6, the process of vaccine preparation was underway. Decisions regarding production will be guided by the best scientific information about who needs a vaccine and the new vaccine's safety and effectiveness. Influenza vaccine development can take up to 6 months or longer before the vaccine is available for use.

It is important to recognize that developing a vaccine is different from recommending individuals be immunized. There is a great deal still unknown, how the virus will evolve, how the outbreak will play out in the coming weeks to months, and what populations may be most (or least) at risk.

At this time, the plans for an H1N1 vaccine would be separate from and in addition to the annual seasonal influenza vaccine.

Is Alaska planning an H1N1 immunization program?

The Alaska Department of Health and Social Services has been monitoring the U.S. novel H1N1 vaccine program and is currently updating the Alaska Pandemic Influenza vaccine distribution plan. If and when a new vaccine for novel H1N1 influenza becomes available and CDC makes recommendations as to which groups of people should receive this vaccine, we will be ready. All decisions on immunization programs will be made based on the best scientific and public health evidence available at the time.