



BY NANCY YOUNG, *The Virginian-Pilot*

As you're firming up your resolutions list, make 2007 the year you get your flu pandemic preparedness plans in shape.

No reason to panic. There's no pandemic yet, but experts say an avian flu virus called H5N1 could be the one, if it begins spreading easily from human to human. Worldwide, 157 human deaths have been attributed to the virus since 2003.

While none of the H5N1 cases have been in the United States, if a pandemic does hit, it would do so here quickly.

Millions of Americans could be infected. Preparing in advance can make things go easier.

# PLAN FOR THE NEXT Pandemic

"We frequently don't know an epidemic is on us until it's here," said Betty Rouse, regional epidemiologist for the Virginia Department of Health.

And if a pandemic doesn't hit? Be very thankful – and just keep what you've stored and the plans you've made in case of any emergency or illness.

## HOW BAD CAN IT BE?

A flu pandemic is a global outbreak of serious illness. There were three such pandemics in the 1900s.

The most serious one, the "Spanish flu" outbreak of 1918, killed about 675,000 people in the United States and between 20 million and 50 million people worldwide.

About 70,000 Americans were killed by the "Asian flu" pandemic of 1957-58.

About 34,000 Americans were killed by the "Hong Kong flu" pandemic of 1968-69.

Last month, a team of scientists from Harvard University's Initiative for Global Health estimated a pandemic similar to that of 1918 would kill 62 million people worldwide, mostly in developing countries.

Sources: U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, *The Lancet*

## What to expect

**Thirty percent** of the general population, and 40 percent of school-age children, could be infected in a flu pandemic.

**Absenteeism** could reach as high as 40 percent due to illness, fear of illness, taking care of children at home because of school closures, or other reasons.

**Contagiousness** is greatest in the first few days of the illness, and each infected person would spread the virus to approximately two more people.

**Multiple outbreaks**, lasting six to eight weeks each, are possible.

## Don't wait for a crisis

**Often when people start preparing**, the questions spawn more questions and it's easy to get overwhelmed, said Betty Rouse, regional epidemiologist for the Virginia Department of Health. "Every place you turn with it, there's a whole set of issues that surround it."

**But thinking ahead now** is better than trying to answer all those questions in the midst of a crisis. If you're just starting to plan, there are plenty of folks who have been at it awhile. Rouse said health officials have been talking about a pandemic since the late 1990s.

**For more information** on planning and pandemic flu in general, check these Web sites:

Virginia Department of Health:  
[www.vdh.state.va.us](http://www.vdh.state.va.us). (Click on "Flu Toolkit.")

Centers for Disease Control and Prevention:  
[www.cdc.gov](http://www.cdc.gov).

## What families can do to prepare

### You should have these items ready:

- ✓ Two weeks' worth of bottled water
- ✓ Toiletries and cleaning supplies
- ✓ Paper goods
- ✓ Ready-to-eat canned goods
- ✓ Cereal
- ✓ Dried fruit
- ✓ Peanut butter
- ✓ Flashlights
- ✓ Portable radio
- ✓ Spare batteries
- ✓ Manual can opener

**"Do it over a period of time** so it's not so overwhelming," Rouse advised. "First you work on a place to put it, a storage box, then make a list and gradually work through what you need." Replace the items once or twice a year, making sure that the "use by" dates are not close to expiration.

**Arrange with your doctor** or insurance company to get extra supplies of prescription medication. Have over-the-counter medicines and medical equipment, such as pain relievers, stomach remedies, thermometers and protective masks.

### Have extra food on hand for pets.

**Have an information card** for family members, with their blood types, allergies, medical conditions, current medications, vaccine records and emergency contacts.

**Make a plan with your family**, friends and neighbors about how you will take care of each other. For example, who will take care of the children if both parents become ill?

**Ask, "Who in your community** may need assistance" and who is able to help, Rouse said.

**A more detailed checklist is available** from the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services at [www.pandemicflu.gov](http://www.pandemicflu.gov). Click on "Individual Planning" at the top of the site.

## What businesses can do to prepare

### Designate a pandemic plan coordinator.

**"Try to figure out where you might fit** in all this," Rouse said. "Realistically look at whether what you provide will be in high demand or low demand as a result of what's going on."

**If your business will be in high demand** – as a grocery store might be – consider how you might change what you stock during emergencies, when transportation of goods will be more limited, Rouse said. For example, consider getting more of the basics – such as milk, bread and toilet paper – and less of the luxuries.

**Look at alternative ways of doing business** to minimize exposure risks. "Maybe more phone service rather than face-to-face, maybe it'll become more online," Rouse said.

**Determine sick leave policies in advance.** Ill employees may feel that they should tough it out and come in, particularly if a day's or week's pay is at stake – but that would spread the illness further. Will you have sick pay?

**Check out your insurance plan.** Will it help cover your losses if you had to temporarily shut down because of a pandemic?

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**If you'd like more individualized help** developing a plan, call your local health department.

Sources: U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, Virginia Department of Health