Pandemic Flu
Important information for you and your family
An influenza (flu) pandemic is currently being predicted by experts at the World Health Organization. This leaflet describes pandemic flu, the risk of it occurring in this country, what makes it different from the ‘ordinary’ flu we get every winter, and what the UK is doing to prepare for a possible flu pandemic.
WHAT IS PANDEMIC FLU?

Pandemic flu is a type of influenza that occurs every few decades and which spreads rapidly to affect most countries and regions around the world. The symptoms of pandemic flu are similar to those of ‘ordinary’ flu but are usually more severe.

Some of the differences between pandemic and ‘ordinary’ flu are listed in the table on the following pages.

HOW DOES A FLU PANDEMIC START?

Flu viruses are constantly changing, producing new strains. Pandemics occur when a virus develops that is so different from previously circulating strains that few, if any, people have any immunity to it. This allows it to spread widely and rapidly, affecting many hundreds of thousands of people.

A new pandemic virus may emerge through the mixing of a human flu virus with an animal flu virus (usually a bird (avian) flu virus).
What is the difference between

‘ORDINARY’ FLU

Occurs every year during the winter

Affects up to about 10% of the population

For most people it is an unpleasant but not life-threatening infection

The very young, the very old and people with certain chronic illnesses are most at risk of serious illness

Annual vaccination is available for those at risk of serious illness

Antiviral drugs are available to treat those at special risk
'ordinary' flu and pandemic flu?

PANDEMIC FLU

There were three pandemics last century. Occurs sporadically at any time of the year

May affect around 25% of the population

It could be a more serious infection for everyone

People of every age may be at risk of serious illness

A vaccine won’t be available to start with – when it does become available the aim will be to immunise the whole population as rapidly as vaccine supplies come through

Antiviral drugs are being stockpiled and will be used in the most effective way, according to how the disease develops
HOW LIKELY IS A FLU PANDEMIC?

Three pandemics occurred in the last century (see opposite page). Scientists predict that another pandemic will happen, possibly soon, although they cannot say when that will be.

HOW LIKELY IS IT THAT PANDEMIC FLU WILL SPREAD TO THE UK?

The World Health Organization is on constant lookout for the first signs of a pandemic emerging so steps can be taken to slow its spread or contain it. If a pandemic flu strain emerges overseas, it will almost certainly reach the UK. Once it arrives, it is likely to spread throughout the country in a matter of weeks.
PANDEMICS DURING THE LAST CENTURY

'Spanish Flu'
Year: 1918-1919
Estimated deaths: 20-40 million (global), 250,000 (UK)
Age group most affected: Healthy young adults (20-50 years)

'Asian Flu'
Year: 1957-1958
Estimated deaths: 1 million (global), 33,000 (UK)
Age group most affected: Very young and very old

'Hong Kong Flu'
Year: 1968-1969
Estimated deaths: 1-4 million (global), 30,000 (England and Wales)
Age group most affected: Very old and those with underlying medical conditions