



Powered by  Clickability

## The great flu pandemic: Despite dire warnings, public interest has waned

Updated 2/1/2007 9:22 AM ET

By Anita Manning, USA TODAY

Health officials in the USA and around the world have warned for years that a flu pandemic is coming, and the world needs to prepare. There's no telling when it will come, they say, but once it does, it could overwhelm society.

That message, once heard loud and alarmingly clear by the American public, is growing muted. Interest in a pandemic, and in the bird flu some believe may one day cause it, has waned.

And that may be just fine.

"You need your response people to be interested but don't expect to have everybody at high response to this threat all the time," Barbara Reynolds, a communications expert with the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, said during a conference call last week with state and local health officials.

The concern in the public-health sector can be seen this week as experts gather at pandemic-planning meetings and the CDC tests strategies in a pandemic flu response exercise.

"There's an issue with complacency, in that we've been talking about pandemic for years and it hasn't arrived," says Rich Besser, director of the CDC's Coordinating Center for Terrorism Preparedness and Emergency Response. But "there's incredible work going on around the country in terms of pandemic preparation."

But for the average American right now, it may be enough to be aware of the threat and know where to get more information should a pandemic become imminent, Reynolds says.

Readiness checklists posted by the Department of Health and Human Services at [www.pandemicflu.gov](http://www.pandemicflu.gov) advise families to store two weeks' worth of food and water and to make sure to have a portable radio, flashlight and other necessities.

Reynolds says one measure of public interest was an unprecedented spike in traffic to the CDC's flu website. That occurred on Jan. 24, 2006, between 4 and 5 p.m. ET, momentarily mystifying the communications office until the CDC identified the cause: That was the day Oprah Winfrey hosted a program on pandemic flu.

"The risk of pandemic had its moment in the sun, where the public was interested, and people were talking about it in grocery lines," risk-communications expert Peter Sandman says. "Then people got used to it, and interest settled into the new normal."

In the USA, no birds carrying the virus have been found, and no Americans have been infected. Most human cases were caused by direct contact with infected poultry, but scientists have warned that the virus could change and spread quickly from person to person.

"My concern is that the pandemic was overblown to start with," says Phil Geis, a microbiologist in Cincinnati. Geis, who works in the food industry, posted a message on a food safety electronic mailing list that read in part: "No doubt the sensationalist news media drove my thinking, but it does seem health officials projected a much more timely and dramatic scenario of pandemic."

But the risk of a pandemic remains and may be increasing, health officials say, as cases continue to be reported.

The H5N1 bird flu has spread across Asia and into Europe since early 2003 and has infected at least 270 people in 10 countries, killing 164. On Wednesday, Nigeria announced its first suspected human H5N1 death. In Indonesia, 63 of 81 cases have been

fatal, the highest number in any country.

Pandemic is "on the back burner for the majority of Americans, where it should be," Sandman says, but "it's not on the back burner of governments and companies."

Among planning efforts:

- A series of meetings began last week to gather information from state and local health officials, consumer advocates and the public on how to prioritize the use of vaccines in the early months of a pandemic when supplies probably would be short. Sponsored by the National Association of County and City Health Officials, the Association of State and Territorial Health officials and The Keystone Center, meetings are planned in Milwaukee Feb. 24 and Henderson County, N.C., March 3.

- On Wednesday, the CDC activated its pandemic flu emergency operations system in a 24-hour exercise.

- Today, the CDC will issue guidance to states and communities on ways to slow the spread of flu by limiting large gatherings or temporarily closing schools.

- Flu experts and public health officials are being updated on new research and planning at a meeting near Washington, D.C., ending Friday.

"Within the public health world (the pandemic threat is) a tremendous concern, and what's happening in Indonesia is scaring a lot of people," says Jeffrey Levi, director of Trust for America's Health, a health advocacy group.

"I don't think you'd find in the White House, HHS or the public health community any reduction of concern, and probably there's heightened concern because the odds keep going against us."


**Find this article at:**

[http://www.usatoday.com/news/health/2007-01-31-great-flu-pandemic\\_x.htm?POE=click-refer](http://www.usatoday.com/news/health/2007-01-31-great-flu-pandemic_x.htm?POE=click-refer)

Check the box to include the list of links referenced in the article.

Related Advertising Links

What's this?

 **Free Terrell Owens Jersey**  
We'll send you an official T.O. Cowboys jersey for free! Survey req.  
[www.ontheweb-offer.com](http://www.ontheweb-offer.com)

**Supplements To Go!**  
Huge selection of bodybuilding products. Start gaining muscles now.  
[www.supplementstogo.com](http://www.supplementstogo.com)

**Free Sports Picks - NFL Picks and More**  
Free picks from the web's top sports handicapper. Get free picks email  
[www.freeunderdog.com](http://www.freeunderdog.com)

Place your ad here