



# Preparing for Pandemic Flu in Child Care Programs

## What is Pandemic Flu?

Pandemic flu is a new flu virus that begins to spread around the world. People have no immunity to new viruses. Some new viruses may cause only minor illness in humans while others could cause very serious illness or even death. Right now, there is no pandemic flu. However, there is concern among public health officials about a virus seen in Asia and parts of Europe that has spread from birds to people (bird flu or avian flu.) It is possible that this flu could change into a virus that can easily spread from person to person. In that case, there could be a pandemic. Preparing for a pandemic is an important step to decrease the impact of possible worldwide spread of disease.

## Why Prepare Your Program for Pandemic Flu?

It is important to protect the health and safety of the staff, children and families in your program. Child care programs, schools and large public gatherings provide opportunities to spread viruses that cause flu. In the event of a pandemic, exclusion policies for ill children, staff members and those who have ill family members will become stricter. It is also possible that schools and child care programs will be closed by public health officials to decrease the risk of spreading illness. Schools and child care could be closed for weeks, a month or more. Parents may not be able to work if they have to care for an ill child, another family member, or if they are ill themselves. A pandemic flu could seriously impact the staff and families in your program.

## Steps to Prepare for a Pandemic:

*Form a committee* to plan how your program will deal with a pandemic flu. The committee may include staff members, a school district representative, the program director and parents/guardians.

*Identify reliable sources of information.* Watch for public health warnings about the flu, program closings and other recommendations to prevent the spread of flu.

Parents may be fearful and stressed so make sure the information you provide is correct and not based on rumor. Try to provide materials in the native languages of your families and at the appropriate reading level. The website [www.pandemicflu.gov](http://www.pandemicflu.gov) provides information in many languages. Another source for information on pandemic influenza is the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) Hotline at: (800) CDC-INFO or (800) 232-4636. This line is available in English and Spanish, 24 hours a day, 7 days a week. TTY: (888) 232-6348. Questions can be e-mailed to [cdcinfo@cdc.gov](mailto:cdcinfo@cdc.gov)

*Contact your local health department* to learn about your community's plan for pandemic. Determine who in your area will have the authority to close child care programs if there is a flu emergency. Decide how you will contact families and staff in the event of school or program closure. Communicate this information to families and staff.

*Educate the children, staff and families in your program about preventive health practices.* Hand washing (see the CCHP poster Wash Your Hands Properly), covering your cough and sneeze, coughing into your sleeve, getting a yearly flu vaccination and staying home when sick are topics that need to be discussed on a regular basis. Provide information about common sense measures to stay healthy such as eating a balanced diet, including a variety of healthy foods, drinking lots of water and going easy on salt and sugar. Encourage regular exercise and plenty of rest.

*Improve procedures for routine cleaning and sanitizing.* Toys, surfaces and furniture may require increased attention to cleanliness. Remember to

use proper dilutions of sanitizers (see the CCHP publication, Recommendations for Cleaning, Sanitizing and Disinfecting), and provide plenty of ventilation.

**Work with families.** Encourage families to have a backup plan for child care if your program is required to close or if their child is ill. Talk about ideas like parents joining efforts to care for children in small groups in their homes, contacting neighbors or extended family members or working from home when possible. Give families ideas for learning activities for young children while they are home.

**Keep several days supplies** of soap, paper towels, tissues and cleaning products that you will need to help control the spread of infection.

**Plan for staff absences;** including custodial services, waste management, food services and transportation. If your program provides meals, keep a back up supply of non-perishable and canned foods. Trash collection may be slowed or interrupted, so be prepared for uncollected garbage. Bathrooms may need to be cleaned by non-custodial staff members. Determine who will be in charge in the absence of the director.

## Responding to Illness

**Have families inform your program** if a child or a family member has the flu and let families know if there are cases in the program. (See the CCHP form Exposure Notice.) Keep accurate records of when and why children and staff are absent. Include the symptoms that have been reported such as diarrhea, vomiting, coughing, rash etc.

**Greet each child** with a Morning Health Check to see if they are sick. (See the CCHP poster Morning Health Check.) Make it clear that any child or adult who is ill with any flu symptoms will not be admitted. Require all children to stay home until their flu symptoms have gone and they are well enough to participate in activities in you program.

**If a child becomes ill while at your program** have a plan for keeping the child away from the other children such as assigning a sick room. An adult must stay with the child until the family or other designated adult arrives to pick up the child. Keep a supply of facemasks to reduce the spreading of germs. For more information on using masks

to prevent the spread of influenza go to: [www.pandemicflu.gov/vaccine/mask.html](http://www.pandemicflu.gov/vaccine/mask.html)

**Staff members must stay home** if they think they are sick. If they become sick while at the program, they must go home and not return until cleared.

**Communicate with your staff** about the extent of illness in your program and any changes that may take place in the usual routine.

## Recovering from Flu Pandemic

Hold staff meetings and provide information to families. Communicate any changes in your program and provide information from public health officials.

**Provide resources and support** to families who have experienced losses from the flu. Families may have loss of income, long-term health effects and deaths. Understand that this will be a stressful and possibly life-changing event for many.

**Adjust your program activities** to reflect the energy level of staff and children. Provide rest time and quiet areas for children and staff who are recovering.

**Identify families** who may need long-term support or intervention and refer them to those services.

The California Childcare Health Program has many educational materials to help prevent disease. Visit the CCHP website at [www.ucsfchildcarehealth.org](http://www.ucsfchildcarehealth.org) or call the Healthline at (800) 333-3212. Additional materials can be obtained from the Immunization Coordinator at your local health department.

By *Bobbie Rose RN PHN*

### References and Resources:

Pandemic Flu Checklist for Child Care Agencies and Preschools in California available at [www.cde.ca.gov/ls/he/hn/documents/preschpfluheck.doc](http://www.cde.ca.gov/ls/he/hn/documents/preschpfluheck.doc) (cited 08/28/07).

PandemicFlu.gov at [www.Pandemicflu.gov](http://www.Pandemicflu.gov).

U.S. Department of Labor Occupational Safety & Health Administration (OSHA) Guidance on Preparing Workplaces for an Influenza Pandemic at [www.osha.gov/Publications/influenza\\_pandemic.html](http://www.osha.gov/Publications/influenza_pandemic.html).