

Action Steps Individuals Can Take to Prepare for a Possible Influenza Pandemic **Missouri Department of Health and Senior Services, November 7, 2005**

It is likely in the event of a pandemic that adequate supplies of effective medications (antivirals) will be in short supply, and that a vaccine for the particular strain of influenza virus causing the pandemic will not be available for some time, likely for several months. If this occurs, the public will have to use alternative means to protect themselves from becoming infected. Although the strategies outlined below may seem to be basic, they are very effective in reducing the risk of becoming infected with influenza and/or transmitting it to others.

For persons with symptoms in non-health-care settings

Adults can shed influenza virus 1 day before symptoms appear (and up to 5 days after onset of illness), thus the selective use of masks when you are in the proximity of a symptomatic person may not effectively limit transmission in the community. Instead, emphasis should be placed on “respiratory hygiene” or “cough etiquette” for persons with respiratory symptoms when in the presence of another person at home, school, work, and in other public settings. Important components of this strategy include encouraging persons with respiratory symptoms to:

- Cover their mouth and nose when coughing or sneezing.
- Use tissues to contain respiratory secretions and, after use, dispose of them in the nearest waste receptacle.
- Perform hand hygiene (i.e. wash hands frequently or use hand-sanitizer in the absence of soap and water) after having contact with respiratory secretions and potentially contaminated objects/materials.
- Remain at home until the fever is resolved and the cough is resolving to avoid exposing other members of the public.
- If a symptomatic person cannot stay home early in their illness they should be sure to cover their cough with their hand and a tissue. Also, surgical masks can be worn by the infected person to help limit aerosol spread.

Well persons in the community (unvaccinated persons without symptoms)

At this time, no specific recommendations can be made regarding the use of masks in this situation. There currently are no data available to demonstrate the effectiveness of masks in decreasing the risk of infection with influenza virus by the general public. Instead, the following practical practices should be followed, at least until a vaccine is available:

- Avoid crowded conditions
- Wash hands often and well
- Provide tissues and disposal receptacles for symptomatic family members, friends, and colleagues.
- Watch and listen for public health directives at the time of an outbreak for updated information on prevention recommendations, vaccine, and anti-viral agent availability.

In addition to personal hygiene, individuals can prepare for a possible pandemic by having a family plan in case they are requested to remain at home during the period of greatest risk of spread of the virus, or if schools are closed. Families should:

- Have a communication plan to stay in touch with family members.
- Have supplies on hand, including essential medicines, so that they are able to stay at home for an extended period (at least ten days) if asked to do so by public health authorities to limit the spread of the disease in the community. For more information on creating a family plan for an emergency, visit the Missouri Department of Health and Senior Services (DHSS) Ready in Three website at http://www.dhss.mo.gov/Ready_in_3/index.html.