



# **PANDEMIC FLU**

Guidance for infection control for Funeral Directors

**PLANNING FOR A HUMAN INFLUENZA PANDEMIC:**  
**INFECTION CONTROL**  
**HOW TO REDUCE THE SPREAD OF PANDEMIC FLU**  
**Guidance for Funeral Directors**

## **Introduction**

### Who is this guidance for?

1. The guidance is designed to assist funeral directors, embalmers and other staff to protect themselves and those around them.
2. It is in addition to general guidance on planning for a flu pandemic previously issued by the Scottish Government, and available at:  
<http://www.scotland.gov.uk/PandemicFlu>
3. This guidance focuses on pandemic flu, but much of the advice here would also be good practice for reducing the spread of other viral infections.

### When should this guidance be put into practice?

4. You should read the guidance now and make any preparations that need to be made well in advance of a pandemic. While much of the guidance would not need to be implemented until there is a pandemic, some previous preparation – supplies of materials, raising awareness – will help you to be ready to respond to a pandemic.
5. If and when the World Health Organisation changes the pre-pandemic “phase”, the alert level that it uses to guide worldwide planning, you should then review your plans. At that point, everyone will be involved in the fight against pandemic influenza in terms of preventing further spread of the infection.

## **Guidance**

### What is Pandemic Influenza (Flu)?

6. Flu is a familiar infection in Scotland, especially in the winter months. The illness caused by the flu virus can be mild or severe, and can at times lead to death. Some groups of people – older people, young children and people with certain health conditions – are generally more susceptible to flu, and each year people in those groups are encouraged to have a flu vaccination.

7. Pandemic flu differs from ordinary flu occurring when a new flu virus emerges into the human population spreading readily and rapidly from person to person worldwide. There were three pandemics during the past century in 1918-19, 1957 and 1968.

8. As it will be a new virus, the entire population will be susceptible because nobody will have immunity to it. Therefore healthy adults as well as the elderly, young children and people with existing medical conditions will be affected. The lack of immunity in the Scottish (and UK) population will mean that the virus has the potential to spread very quickly between people. In comparison with seasonal flu, many more people could become severely ill and many more could die.

9. The circumstances exist now for a new flu virus to emerge and spread worldwide. Although a pandemic has not yet started, experts warn that it could be soon. It is most likely that the new virus will arise from an avian (bird) flu virus mixing with the human flu virus and becoming able to infect people.

What are the signs and symptoms of flu?

10. It is likely that the signs and symptoms of pandemic flu will be the same as for ordinary flu but may be more severe and cause more serious complications.

Most significant	Other
<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Fever</li><li>• Cough and/or shortness of breath</li><li>• Sudden onset of symptoms</li></ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Aching muscles</li><li>• Sore throat</li><li>• Runny nose, sneezing</li><li>• Loss of appetite</li><li>• Headache</li><li>• Malaise (lethargy, listlessness)</li><li>• Chills</li></ul>

11. Children aged six months or younger can also have tummy aches, diarrhoea and vomiting. In very young children, tiredness, poor feeding and difficulty in breathing can also be early signs of flu.

12. The symptoms of pandemic flu would probably be similar to those of seasonal flu, but they could be more severe and cause more serious complications. A key message during a pandemic should, however, be that, in case of doubt, assume that an infection is pandemic flu, and act accordingly. It is better that someone stays at home for a couple of days with what might turn out to be a normal cold, than go into work or school with the early symptoms of pandemic flu and pass the flu virus on to others.

13. The **incubation period** (the time from being exposed to the virus to showing symptoms of infection) is from one to four days: for most people, it will be two to three days.

14. In terms of the **infectious period** (how long you are infectious to others), people are most infectious soon after they develop symptoms, and remain infectious to some extent until the symptoms disappear. In general, adults can continue to spread flu virus for up to five days, and children for up to seven days, but occasionally longer. Over this period, the amount of virus, and therefore the infection risk to others, will decline as symptoms improve, but does not disappear until the symptoms themselves have disappeared.

What you should you do if you have symptoms or are ill?

15. If you feel ill whilst at work, report it immediately to your line manager or occupational health department. Do not simply carry on working.

16. If you develop symptoms whilst not at work:

- stay at home
- do not go to work until you are fully recovered
- phone your workplace or occupational health department
- seek advice by calling the national flu line

### How is pandemic flu caught and spread to others?

17. Flu, including pandemic flu, is spread from person to person by close contact. Some examples of how it may be spread are shown below:

- a. Infected people can pass the virus to others through coughing, sneezing, or even talking within a close distance (one metre or less).
- b. You can catch the virus by direct contact with an infected person: for example, if you shake or hold their hand, and then touch your own mouth, eyes or nose without first washing your hands.
- c. Influenza viruses can survive for some time in the environment, for example on hard surfaces, (e.g. stainless steel counters or a plastic washing-up bowl) for up to 72 hours. In contrast, soft porous items (e.g. clothes, curtains, seat cushions, tissues, magazines etc,) the virus is transferable for about 24 hours.
- d. Flu virus could be transferred to hands from hard surfaces for up to 24 hours after the surface has been contaminated and from soft items for up to two hours after, albeit in very low quantities after 15 minutes. On this basis it may be possible to catch the virus by touching objects that have previously been touched by an infected person, then touching your own mouth, eyes or nose without first washing your hands.

### What you can do as an individual

18. Everyone can play their part in helping to reduce the spread of pandemic flu. There are two key things to remember:

a. Good hygiene practice:

- Use a tissue to cover your mouth and nose when coughing and/or sneezing.  
Dispose of the tissue promptly and then wash your hands.
- Wash hands frequently with soap and water, especially after coughing, sneezing and using tissues.
- An alcohol handrub could be used as an alternative for cleaning hands.
- Avoid touching your mouth, eyes and nose unless you have recently cleaned your hands.
- Use normal household detergent and water to clean surfaces frequently touched by hands.
- Before you leave work you wash your hands.  
Wash them again soon after you arrive home.

b. If you have flu symptoms (see paragraphs 15 and 16 above), do not go into work; call your manager. If you become ill at work, inform your manager and go home. If your children show flu symptoms, keep them at home.

19. Whilst appropriate use of Personal Protective Equipment (PPE), in some circumstances may offer some protection to clothes from contamination, during the pandemic you may wish to consider changing out of your work clothes before travelling home. Work clothes that are washed at home can be washed in a domestic washing machine.

### Personal Protective Equipment (PPE)

20. Ensure that you are aware of your employer's procedures regarding personal protective equipment (PPE) and that you are using them correctly

- Use the PPE (usually aprons, surgical masks and gloves) as directed by your employer, when there is a risk of contamination from respiratory secretions

## Specific Issues

21. **Body bags** are not necessary for cadavers where flu has been implicated in the death, unless it is thought likely that there would be leakage in transit, or the bodies are otherwise offensive. Bodies cool more slowly inside a body bag, facilitating decomposition and making hygienic preparation more difficult. This may mean that it may only be possible to display the head for viewing causing additional distress to the bereaved.

22. **Laying out.** Hygienic preparation of bodies involving washing the face and hands, closing the eyes and mouth, tidying the hair and possibly shaving the face is permissible. This includes plugging orifices to prevent discharges, or covering any wounds.

23. In some cultures and religious groups, relatives expect to carry out the ritual preparation before burial and, in most cases, this can be permitted but they should be advised to wear gloves and simple protective plastic aprons, also they should be supervised and wash their hands with soap and water afterwards.

24. Viewing and touching the face may also be permitted except where a risk of infection other than influenza exists. For other infections this will need to be assessed and appropriate advice given. This may mean only partial preparation and the use of gloves and other protective clothing.

25. **Embalming.** Since embalming involves the injection of solutions containing formaldehyde, the risk of infection is reduced for most infectious diseases; flu is no exception; however, the solution may not penetrate infectious mucus in the upper respiratory tract.

26. The workrooms of funeral parlours must be of a standard acceptable to the Environmental Health department of the Local Authority. Staff with skin abrasions, cuts, severe eczema or other skin conditions, should report this fact to their supervisor and use impermeable water-proof dressings over the lesions. Staff with uncovered skin lesions or cuts should not work on any body where any infection is likely. Coffins and any body bags used must be leak-proof. Visitors should be subject to the same rules of hygiene and must be supervised if in the workroom.

27. **Environmental procedures/issues.** Body fluids or other contaminated liquids may be discharged into the drainage system, but as far as practical, this should be disinfected before discharge. It should be noted that due to the very high organic load of these liquids, any disinfection process will be of poor quality and should not be relied on. Steps should still be taken to minimise the risk of splashes and droplets, and PPE should be used to protect the face, and to a lesser extent, the body.

28. All non-liquid waste should be put into hazardous infectious waste (yellow) bags, transported and disposed of by incineration or an acceptable licensed company. The *Safe management of healthcare waste 2006* document from the Department of Health, provides guidance on the implementation of the Hazardous Waste Regulation 2005.

29. *Controlling the risks of infection at work from human remains: a guide for those involved in funeral services (including embalmers) and those involved in exhumation* produced by the Health and Safety Executive, June 2005 is useful guidance to be read in conjunction with this section. This can be accessed at [www.hse.gov.uk/pubns/web01.pdf](http://www.hse.gov.uk/pubns/web01.pdf). Further information and links available in the annex.

30. All instruments should be cleaned in warm (not hot) water and detergent. Running water should not be used as it facilitates splashing. Instruments should then be disinfected according to your employer's infection control policy.

31. All spills of blood or other body fluids should be cleaned up promptly. Protective clothing should be worn (gloves and plastic apron). Blood spill should be soaked up by using hypochlorite granules<sup>1</sup> and the spillage mopped up promptly with disposable paper towels. The granules or towels should be scraped/soaked up and placed in a yellow clinical (infectious) waste bag. The area should then be cleaned with general purpose detergent and hot water. For general cleaning of the environment, a general purpose detergent and hot water is preferred. Hypochlorite should not be used in the presence of formaldehyde as there is evidence that hypochlorites can react with formaldehyde to produce a carcinogen. An absorbent substance without hypochlorite should be used.

32. Any action that will bring a staff member's hands in contact with their face whilst undertaking an embalming procedure should be avoided. Strict banning of eating, smoking or drinking must be enforced within work areas.

#### Your business may work differently during the pandemic

33. During a flu pandemic, your business may work in a different way from how it works now. It is likely that there will be a larger number of deaths than usual over a fairly short period of time and therefore cemeteries or crematoria may be working much longer hours to keep up with the likely demand. There may be staff shortages due to illness in employees and their families.

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<sup>1</sup> Chlorine is corrosive to metals and will react with formaldehyde. When chlorine-releasing granules come into contact with urine, chlorine fumes may be released which may lead to respiratory problems.

## Being Prepared: Knowing What To Do

34. If a flu pandemic starts, it will eventually affect the UK. Currently all local authorities are developing plans and preparing to deal with the large numbers of cadavers that may require burial or cremation.

35. This might involve special storage facilities for cadavers or for crematoria or cemeteries to operate extended or on a 24-hour basis.

36. You can be prepared by knowing what to do and by becoming familiar with your employer's safety and handling procedures.

37. The Control of Substances Hazardous to Health (COSHH) regulations must be followed at all times.

## Summary

- The risk of infection from cadavers affected by pandemic flu is low and is minimised by the use of strict infection control procedures such as the use of appropriate protective clothing.
- A body bag should only be considered if there is leakage of body fluids.
- Hygienic preparation of the body is permitted.
- If the body is being collected from home and others in the house are unwell, then a surgical mask should be worn.
- The body can be handled; viewing and touching are allowed.
- Embalming may be carried out in the normal way.
- Remember the signs and symptoms of flu.
- If you are ill whilst at home, do not go into work. Telephone your place of work.
- If you become ill whilst on duty, do not carry on working. Inform your manager immediately.
- Above all else you must observe strict hand and respiratory hygiene

This document has been produced in collaboration with the National Association of Funeral Directors (NAFD) and the Society of Allied and Independent Funeral Directors (SAIF).

**Further information and links**

**Government wide planning:**

<http://www.scotland.gov.uk/PandemicFlu>

The **World Health Organization website** 10 things you should know about pandemic flu.

[www.who.int/csr/disease/influenza/pandemic10things/en/](http://www.who.int/csr/disease/influenza/pandemic10things/en/)

**NHS Scotland Infection control website -**

<http://www.hps.scot.nhs.uk/haic/ic/modelinfectioncontrolpolicies.aspx>