

For more information about this topic, call the Risk Management Division:

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This fact sheet provides information on how individuals, such as employees and missionaries, can protect themselves from an infectious disease during a pandemic through the use of personal protective equipment (PPE).

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### **Background**

A severe pandemic (defined as a world-wide epidemic) in a vulnerable population, such as the 1918 flu pandemic, represents a worst-case scenario for pandemic planning and preparedness. Communities, individuals, employers, schools, and other organizations are being asked to plan for the use of interventions that will help limit the spread of disease. At this time, there is concern because of continued spread of a highly pathogenic avian influenza (H5N1) virus among animals in Asia, Africa, the Middle East, and Europe which has the potential to significantly threaten human health. If a virus such as H5N1 mutates and spreads easily from one person to another, avian influenza may break out globally. While there are no reports of *sustained* human-to-human transmission of avian influenza, governments and international health agencies are preparing for a possible pandemic. A pandemic can originate from any “unknown” source, such as the H5N1 virus.

### **General**

Where contact with infected persons is not expected, individuals interacting with the general population should use basic PPE during a pandemic to prevent sprays of potentially infected liquid droplets (from talking, coughing, or sneezing) from contacting their nose or mouth. For caretakers in contact with possible avian influenza patients, refer to the *Pandemic Planning—Health Care Worker Preparedness* fact sheet or the *Pandemic Planning – Home and Family Preparedness* fact sheet.

### **Surgical Masks and Respirators**

Surgical masks provide protection from liquid droplets and are generally recommended. Respirators, such as N95 respirators, may be considered if there is an expectation of close contact with persons who have symptomatic influenza infection. Follow the surgical mask or respirator manufacturer’s fitting instructions to ensure proper fit and usage.

### **Eye Protection**

Eye protection generally is not required to prevent influenza infection.

### **Hand Washing**

Individuals should wash hands frequently with soap and water or a hand sanitizer to prevent hands from transferring potentially infectious material from surfaces to their mouths or noses.

### **Gloves**

While individuals may choose to wear gloves, the exposure of concern is touching the mouth and nose with a contaminated hand and not exposure to the virus through broken skin (for example, cuts or scrapes). While the use of gloves may make individuals more aware of potential hand

contamination, there is no difference between intentional or unintentional touching of the mouth, nose, or eyes with either a contaminated glove or a contaminated hand.

### **Proper Removal of PPE**

Remove PPE in the proper sequence to avoid contamination.

1. Because gloves are considered the most contaminated piece of PPE, remove them first. Do not touch the outside of gloves with your bare hands during removal. If you contaminate your hands during the removal process, wash them before continuing.
2. Surgical masks or N95 respirators may be contaminated because droplets may have landed on them or you may have touched your face by mistake while wearing your PPE. Touch only the ties or straps at the back of your head. Slowly remove the straps, taking care that the respirator does not contaminate your bare skin or clothing.
3. Dispose of used PPE in a plastic lined trash can or a plastic bag. Seal the plastic bag for later disposal. Hold the bag by the outside and avoid any rush of air as you seal it.
4. Always wash your hands thoroughly with soap and water or a hand sanitizer immediately after PPE removal.

### **Summary**

When selecting PPE, consider factors such as function, fit, long-term comfort, ability to be decontaminated, disposal, and cost. Sometimes, when a piece of PPE will have to be used repeatedly for a long period of time, a more expensive and durable piece of PPE may be less expensive in the long run than a disposable piece of PPE. During a pandemic, recommendations for PPE use may change, depending on information on PPE effectiveness in preventing the spread of influenza.

### **Reference**

[www.osha.gov/Publications/OSHA3327pandemic.pdf](http://www.osha.gov/Publications/OSHA3327pandemic.pdf) Guidance on Preparing Workplaces for an Influenza Pandemic. OSHA 3327-02N 2007.