



## A Pandemic Flu Primer for Camano and Whidbey Island

Natural disasters have been predominant in the news these past few years. Tsunamis, hurricanes, earthquakes, fires and floods have dominated headlines, and the issue of swine flu has become ever-present on front pages and newscasts. In 2009-10, we're likely to see even more attention focused on the development of the disease and efforts to prepare for a pandemic. Given the onslaught of information, not all of which is accurate or consistent, we here in the islands are left with a logical question: **“What does it mean for us locally?”**

In order to help answer that concern, we will address some frequently asked questions:

**1. Where can I learn more general information about flu pandemic and its chances of happening?**

There are lots of good sources of info. The best: <http://www.cdc.gov/h1n1flu/>. You might click on the “Pandemic Flu” link at [www.islandcounty.net/health/Index.htm](http://www.islandcounty.net/health/Index.htm) for links to other online resources, or contact Island County Public Health services at (360) 679-7350.

**2. What would a Pandemic mean for Island County?**

Predicting the results of a pandemic is as much art as science. We use past flu outbreaks (like the ones in 1918 and 1957) to guide us. Current thinking suggests that somewhere between 28,000 to 36,000 islanders would become infected. Of those sick, 1% (320) may require hospitalization; up to 15% (48) of these may succumb to the illness. These figures are for the current novel H1N1 influenza virus, and do not include the effects of the regular seasonal flu. (*GET YOUR SEASONAL FLU SHOT!*)

Pandemics typically come in two to three waves of active infection. Each wave would last six to eight weeks and would be repeated after a period of little or no disease in the community. All schools, daycares, and public gathering spots may possibly be closed for some time during each wave. During each active phase of the pandemic, upwards of 30% of the workforce is likely to be staying home at some time, either because they are sick, care for someone who is, or are caring for children who are out of school.

Because a pandemic will affect communities across the globe, food, fuel, access to mainland healthcare, and other services and supplies we've come to count on may be in short supply. Prepare now for your family's needs for staple items.

**3. What do I need to do to prepare?**

As with all disasters, being able to keep you and your family warm, fed, hydrated, and supplied with vital medications is key. If islanders are prepared individually, the islands will survive collectively. During a pandemic, power, water, and other essential services will likely continue without interruption, but access to food, fuel, and routine healthcare may be limited.

4. Currently, wearing a mask is not recommended for routine use (e.g., in public) for preventing influenza exposure. In the United States, disposable surgical and procedure masks have been widely used in health-care settings to prevent exposure to respiratory infections, but the masks have not been used commonly in community settings, such as schools, businesses, and public gatherings.

It makes sense to stockpile a supply of food. Build up a surplus, rotate through what you've stored, and make sure you replace what you use. In addition to weathering shortages, if you and your family can take care of yourselves from home without frequent trips out, you'll minimize your chances of interacting with contagious islanders. Island County Department of Emergency Services has developed an excellent web site on how individuals and smaller communities can prepare for emergencies: <http://www.islandcounty.net/sheriff/dem>.

Perhaps the hardest but most critical step to prepare is to truly understand that in the unlikely event of a severe pandemic, the world will be a different place. Routine services may be limited and much that we take for granted in our regular lives may be unavailable or stopped. To survive the challenge will take preparation, patience, and perseverance. It won't be easy, and there will be no magic solution. The current situation does not pose such a level of severity, but preparation is still necessary.

#### **4. What is Island County doing to prepare?**

Planning for a flu pandemic is a tremendous challenge for all levels of government. Our primary focus is on increasing awareness — first within public agencies, and then within the general public. Meetings and tabletop exercises with community leaders, public health staff, emergency responders, and health care providers have been held for the past several years and are continuing. As in all disasters, communication is critical, and as cooperation and understanding increases, our ability to respond improves. Continuity of Business (COB) planning is essential for every business.

For face-to-face business during a pandemic, the health department has stockpiled facemasks for its visitors who may exhibit a cough, and recommends that businesses have their own supply of masks for such purposes. Surgical masks will suffice... N-95 masks are only recommended for workers in patient contact environments (hospitals & clinics). Mask recommended by Health Officer: [www.emrytrading.com/Virogard.html](http://www.emrytrading.com/Virogard.html) . Better yet, hand sanitizer dispensers strategically placed for public and staff use.

#### **5. During a pandemic, how will residents be kept informed of the latest updates?**

Systems we use now will continue to be used, only with much greater frequency. Newspapers, online news sources, local and mainland radio and TV stations, and bulk mailings to every islander will all be part of the communication plan. You have already experienced this with the current H1N1 situation. Unlike other types of disasters, pandemic flu situations may well preclude large community "town meetings" or other gatherings since the idea is to minimize any spread of the disease.

#### **6. If available, how will vaccines or medications for the flu be distributed?**

Under the current U.S. National Health and Human Services Plan limited supplies of anti-viral medications have been made available to augment local pharmacy supplies. The use of these medications is recommended only for certain categories of patients and specific situations in order to avoid resistance to the medications. For the most part, we will probably be taking care of our sick much like they did in 1918 (keeping the patient warm, hydrated, and cared for). The most critical of the ill will have access to special facilities set up on the islands, but most of the sick will need to be cared for at home by their families. Isolation and sanitation are key components to successfully containing the illness.

An effective vaccine is being made available for 196 million doses nationwide, and will begin arriving in mid-to-late October 2009. Prioritization of the vaccine administration will be announced when the vaccine arrives locally. We are likely to experience the onset of the current pandemic prior to the arrival of the vaccine. Current directives for mitigating the effects of the pandemic include the non-pharmaceutical measures of personal sanitary measures: washing hands, covering cough, staying home if ill, and avoiding crowds when the disease become rampant. And get the current flu shot when it becomes available.

**7. Can we isolate the islands early on and prevent the spread of disease here?**

This is an appealing idea, but impractical and perhaps illegal. People are contagious with the flu before they show symptoms, so it is impossible to screen arrivals to the islands. The logistics of restricting all arrivals would take more manpower than we have locally, and the reality is that in the past this type of isolation has been ineffective in stopping the spread of disease. A more effective approach is to aggressively close public gatherings of all kinds, and to strongly encourage residents to stay home and minimize exposure.

**8. If I am sick, will I be confined to my house?**

People with fever and cough will be strongly encouraged to stay at home. A phone triage system will be established to evaluate whether a patient needs more advanced care. Forced isolation may be used in the case of a contagious individual who purposefully puts others at risk, but it will truly be in everyone's best interest to minimize their own exposure, and once sick to avoid spreading the illness to friends, co-workers, neighbors, and other islanders.

**9. This sounds scary, so why aren't we more panicked?**

Though they've happened throughout history at regular intervals, there is no guarantee of a pandemic in any given year. Currently there is a world-wide pandemic, though it appears to be relatively mild in severity. The risks are real, but are just one of any number of remote dangers we face everyday. Like strapping on your seat belt, it is relatively easy for a family to take the steps needed to prepare. The most effective preparation for any disaster begins by being prepared at home and staying informed.

**Remember — “If it is to be, it's up to me”**