

Current Influenza Pandemic Global Severity Assessment

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Introduction

In the 20th Century, the health and social impact of the three influenza pandemics (1918, 1957 and 1968) varied widely, ranging from the least severe in 1968 to very severe in 1918. To provide context and guidance to countries on the current situation following WHO's decision to declare phase 6, WHO has provided an initial global assessment of this pandemic's severity.

Current Severity of the Pandemic is Considered "Moderate"

At this time, WHO considers the overall severity of the pandemic to be **moderate**. This assessment is based on the clinical and epidemiological information available to WHO to date, as well as input from its Member States on the pandemic's impact on their health systems and more generally on their social and economic functioning. More specifically, this assessment reflects that:

1. Most people recover from infection without the need for hospitalization or medical care.
2. Overall, national levels of clinically severe or fatal cases respiratory illness appear similar to levels seen during local seasonal influenza periods-- although in some local areas and institutions, high levels of disease have occurred.
3. Overall, hospitals and health care systems in most countries generally have been able to cope with the numbers of people seeking care -- although in some localities, some facilities and systems have been stressed.

This assessment is also made with the understanding and concern that the current patterns of serious cases and fatalities are occurring primarily among young persons, including the previously healthy and those with pre-existing medical conditions or pregnancy. Moreover, large outbreaks of disease have not yet been reported in many countries, and the full clinical spectrum of disease has yet to be described.

These considerations are important and WHO stresses that close monitoring and timely and regular sharing of this information with WHO during the pandemic period is essential for WHO to make changes in future severity assessments if needed.

Discussion

Based on historical patterns, the severity of pandemics can change considerably over time and differ by location or population. Such changes in severity may reflect: a) changes in the virus, b) underlying vulnerabilities c) limitations in health system capacity, or d) some combination of these. At this time, the pandemic is early in its evolution and many countries have not yet been substantially affected. Moreover, the virus may evolve and change its pathogenicity in the future. WHO will continue to assess the pandemic's global severity and will update its assessments on a regular basis through the pandemic period.