

Just how do influenza pandemics break out and what can we expect from the H5N1 or avian flu version? What might the short and long term consequences look like? Here is a Bird Flu scenario based on historical facts and well-educated guesses from experts. Be aware and prepare.

Bird Flu Pandemic a scenario

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It was unusually hot and sticky as Paul boarded the wide-body jet from Hong Kong's Chek Lap Kok airport. He went through his mental check-list: boarding card, passport, extra-thick book (it would be a long flight to Heathrow, London, one of the world's busiest airports). Paul found his seat, wrestled his carry-on bag into the overhead compartment and abruptly sat down. He closed his eyes in contemplation. It had been a good trip but he was tired and looking forward to getting home. His mind wandered and he missed the safety film and exhilarating G-forces as the jet ascended gracefully out of China's air space.

Paul's own coughing jolted him awake. He glanced at his watch and was pleased to note he had slept through half of the flight. He took the opportunity to stroll up and down the length of the plane. Not a vacant seat. Coughing mildly he planned his next movements. It would be rush-hour when he arrived in London – faster to take the underground train or "Tube" home then to take a taxi. The airport would be packed but he knew the train schedule well enough to make it. Still, it would be tight. He had tickets for the stadium tonight and he wanted to be on time. Anticipating the excitement of the game awaiting him, Paul barely noticed the sneezing that was accompanying his worsening cough.

Riiiiiiiiiiiiing! The sound seemed to explode in Paul's ears. Groggy, he sat up and quickly wished he hadn't. He tried to recall – ah yes, of course. Riiiiiiiiing! He sprang up and found his telephone. Glancing at the display he saw it was his office. He took the call, grunted and pressed the off switch. Squeezing his eyes shut he thought about Asia, his flight home and the stadium. His favorite team had won, he and his friends had had a great time and his coughing and sneezing were relatively mild – life wasn't so bad after all. Now he had to hurry. His office wanted him urgently. Today was a meeting of the global executives and they wanted to hear his analysis of sales in China. He shook the aspirin bottle. Empty. Pity, he had to perform well at this meeting of the bosses. They had all flown into England a week ago and he remembered they were all flying out again tonight to destinations around the globe. "Bad time to catch the flu," he mumbled to himself.

The global board-meeting had gone well. Paul had given a succinct presentation of company growth in South-east Asia and was awarded a few days off to get over his sniffles and sneezes. He took the opportunity to jostle with the masses who were looking for bargains in busy shops and malls. He remembered to get more aspirin, cough suppressant and nasal spray. He pulled his coat tightly around him and shivered. "A touch of fever?" he wondered. He decided he would be better off in bed and headed home.

What Paul didn't know was that his body was fighting strenuously against two viruses. Paul had caught a highly infectious Influenza A bug – a flu virus. However, at much the same time he had also picked up a second virus called H5N1. The two viruses had mixed their genes and formed a hybrid. Now his DNA was being attacked. His over-the-counter cold remedies would be of no help now. In fact, if his immune system didn't kill the virus, nothing could help him. It was too late for vaccinations or anti-viral medication.

To make matters worse, Paul had helped spread the new hybrid virus around London and the world thus starting the first flu pandemic of the 21st century. Of course once the medical community realized what had happened it wouldn't take them long to develop a vaccine, but it was already too late for Paul and for many, many others. Several passengers from Paul's plane from Hong Kong had connecting flights to major cities in most continents. And the global executives Paul had addressed at the office had also flown home infected with the new virus. The so-called Bird Flu or Avian Influenza had indeed spread its wings.

What Paul also couldn't know was what havoc his new hybrid virus would wrack upon the world. Despite clear instructions from governments and health agencies, panic broke out as people realized that at best only one third of the population had access to anti-viral drugs. Several countries were simply unable to distribute vaccines when they became available. In both densely populated cities and out-of-the-way rural communities medical assistance became virtually impossible. Although the elderly and very young were most susceptible to the virus, as usual, the poor had little chance of aid at all. Vibrant cities screeched to a halt as public transport shut down. Streets stank as garbage piled up. Shops were looted and in some cases those caught coughing were stoned. Since public safety services (fire, police, ambulance) were disrupted quarantines were set in place but had little effect stopping the virus spread. Cross-border travel was curtailed killing tourism and all international sports events were cancelled. Food imports were banned creating shortages of meat, vegetables and wheat. Folk with chronic medical illnesses couldn't get their medications since pharmacies were only selling vaccines. And especially in poorer, hotter areas, bacterial disease such as cholera multiplied rapidly with catastrophic results across Africa and Asia. Soap and hot water – perhaps the simplest and most effective fight against viral disease spread – were in short supply; no one had thought to stock-pile soap. Mass graves were dug but since funerals (and all public gatherings) were banned, the emotional pain for surviving family members was almost unbearable.

And of course that list only described part of the short-term effect. The first wave of the pandemic was over in three months time but not the economic shock. The longer-term, global recession began with the realization that supply-lines, manufacturing and food-production chains were desperately weakened through labour loss. And then came the second wave of Avian flu. It took over a year before the waves of sickness and death became controllable.

Paul actually survived it all. Although he “started” the pandemic, he also helped “end” it. Doctors used his blood to find the initial vaccine. Since Paul was also now immune, he not only volunteered to help where he could but started a global educational programme to improve hygiene habits. Paul and others like him helped disrupted societies regain their faith in God, their hope and their love for others. Since this was pandemic number 11 in the last 300 years history had taught that it was inevitable that individuals and communities and countries would bounce back fairly quickly. But a bitter question remained. Would Paul and the rest of the world be better prepared for the next pandemic? Paul wondered that too as he boarded the wide-body jet destined for Mexico City.

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