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## Reliable information on new flu critical – WHO chief



WHO Director-General Dr. Margaret Chan addressing the high-level consultation on pandemic influenza A(H1N1) in Geneva

18 May 2009 – Obtaining reliable information on the different aspects of the influenza A(H1N1) infection is critical to make informed decisions on how to manage the outbreak and prepare for a possible global pandemic, the head of the United Nations World Health Organization ([WHO](#)) said today.

“We are all under pressure to make urgent and far-reaching decisions in an atmosphere of considerable scientific uncertainty,” Dr. Margaret Chan, WHO’s Director-General, [said](#) in her remarks to the high-level consultation on pandemic influenza A(H1N1), held in Geneva.

As of today, 40 countries have officially reported 8,829 cases of the new flu strain, including 74 deaths. WHO's pandemic alert level remains at Phase 5 – on a six-point warning scale – meaning that sustained human-to-human transmission of the virus on a community level is restricted to one of the agency's geographic regions, in this case North America.

“What we need most of all, right now, is information,” stressed Dr. Chan. “We need information, at many levels of science, clinical medicine, and epidemiology, on the situation we are seeing today. We also need information to construct possible scenarios for the future. This, too, helps us assess and manage risks, and guides preparation measures.”

She said she convened the high-level consultation to gather and share information. “We are fortunate that the countries with the most confirmed cases to date have already learned so much, and shared so much. All countries profit from this expression of solidarity,” she stated.

In addition to protecting health, governments and health ministries need information for reliable communications with their citizens.

“The job of managing public perceptions and behaviours also falls on our shoulders,” she pointed out. “We need to warn the public when necessary, but reassure them whenever possible. This is a difficult balancing act.”

Dr. Chan emphasized that the prospect of an influenza pandemic rightly deserves the highest attention of governments, health ministries, public health officials, and industry.

“Under the unique conditions of our highly mobile and closely interdependent societies, the threat of a pandemic deserves attention from many other sectors of government, and many other partners,” she noted. The consultations included an update on the current situation from senior WHO officials, as well as presentations by experts from Mexico, the United States and Canada, who shared their experiences with the infection so far.

The flu outbreak will be among the public health issues discussed at the World Health Assembly, which began its week-long session today.

Secretary-General Ban Ki-moon, who is currently in Geneva, will address the gathering tomorrow as well as speak to reporters along with Dr. Chan.

In her address to the opening of the Assembly, Dr. Chan noted that the prospect of the first influenza pandemic of this century is one of several crises the world is facing, along with the current financial turmoil and economic downturn.

She noted that 85 per cent of the burden of chronic diseases was concentrated in low and middle income countries, which meant that the developing world had by far the largest pool of people at risk for severe and fatal H1N1 infections.

Therefore, the international community must look at everything that could be done to collectively protect developing countries from bearing the brunt of an influenza pandemic, she said.

The Assembly brings together officials from WHO's 193 member countries for an annual review of the agency's activities and to set new priorities for the future. Also on its agenda this week are implementation of the International Health Regulations; primary health care, including health system strengthening; social determinants of health; and monitoring the achievement of the health-related Millennium Development Goals ([MDGs](#)).

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