
This fact sheet provides information on how to utilize “Social Distancing” as a means to help control or minimize the spread of a possible pandemic among individuals and in the community.

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. Pandemic concerns escalated due to spread of avian influenza (H5N1) virus among animals in Asia, Africa, the Middle East and Europe which has the potential to threaten human health. In 2009 a pandemic occurred from a new influenza virus called H1N1 (referred to as “swine flu” early on). This virus is spreading from person-to-person worldwide. Health experts are predicting that we will see a continuation of the spread of the H1N1 influenza virus.

What is the concept of Social Distancing?

Social distancing (SD), self-shielding, voluntary isolation, and reverse quarantine are all methods that attempt to limit close physical proximity between infected and healthy individuals. They provide individuals with some measure of personal control over their own exposure to a potential pandemic. SD can be instituted voluntarily by individuals or through actions taken by local, state or government officials e.g., closure of schools, discontinuance of public transportation, and restrictions on large-gatherings or public venues. During the 1918 pandemic, leaders of the Church were supportive of SD efforts to curtail public meetings and other social functions sponsored by the Church. Some examples of their efforts were:

- Postponing the April 1919 sessions of General Conference until June
- Holding a non-public funeral for President Joseph F. Smith
- Suspending local Church meetings in areas affected by the pandemic
- Holding special fasts to help ease the pandemic
- Publishing articles in Saturday’s edition of the *Deseret Evening News* to help fill the spiritual void left when church services were suspended

Why Social Distancing?

Influenza is thought to be primarily spread through large respiratory droplets (droplet transmission) that directly contact the nose, mouth, or eyes. These droplets are produced when infected people cough, sneeze or talk sending the infectious droplets and very small sprays (aerosols) into the air and into contact with other people. Large droplets can only travel a limited distance; therefore, people should limit close contact (within 6 feet) with others when possible. To a lesser degree, human influenza is spread by touching objects contaminated with influenza viruses and then transferring the infected material from the hands to the nose, mouth or eyes.

Benefits of Social Distancing

Adults may decrease their risk of infection by practicing SD and minimizing their non-essential social contacts and exposure to highly-populated environments. Low-cost and sustainable SD practices can be adopted by individuals within their community (e.g., going to the grocery store once a week rather than every other day, avoiding large public gatherings) and at their workplace (e.g., spacing people farther apart in the workplace, telecommuting when feasible, substituting teleconferences for meetings) for the duration of a community outbreak. Many factors make children especially important in the transmission of influenza. Compared with

adults, children usually shed more influenza virus and for a longer period. They also are less skilled in handling their secretions and are in close proximity with many other children for most of the day at school. Schools, in particular, clearly serve as a means to transmit seasonal community influenza epidemics. Infected children and parents are also thought to play a major role in introducing and transmitting influenza virus within their households.

Therefore, given the disproportionate contribution of children in spreading disease and viruses, targeting their social networks both within and outside of schools would be expected to help disrupt influenza spread. Given that children and teens are together at school for a significant portion of the day, dismissal of students from school could effectively disrupt a significant portion of influenza transmission within these age groups.

Mathematical modeling also suggests a reduction of overall disease, especially when schools are closed early in the outbreak. Parents may determine to keep their children at home, therefore providing a form of voluntary SD. During this period, parents would be encouraged to consider childcare arrangements that do not result in large gatherings of children outside the school setting.

Basics of Social Distancing

Social distancing may be a viable alternative for the general public to avoid the pandemic influenza infection until a vaccine becomes available. Below, in order of potential effectiveness, are various aspects of SD suggestions:

1. Limit exposure to other people within 6 feet.
2. Minimize exposure to enclosed spaces containing crowds, such as movie theatres, grocery stores, gas stations, schools, malls, etc.
3. Use personal protective equipment, such as N95 masks (see *Pandemic Planning-Personal Protective Equipment Fact Sheet*), if you must get within 6 feet of anyone outside your immediate family (or other individuals where you have intimate knowledge of their health conditions) or if you must go into an enclosed space containing crowds. It should be noted that there is limited information on the use of surgical masks for the control of a pandemic in settings where there is no identified source of infection.
4. Wash hands after touching any item that may have been touched by others or use disposable gloves (see *Pandemic Planning-Personal Hygiene Fact Sheet* for more details). Studies have shown that influenza virus can survive on environmental surfaces and can infect a person for 2 to 8 hours after being deposited on the surface.

Potential Impacts of Social Distancing

Closure of office buildings, stores, schools, and public transportation systems may be feasible community containment measures during a pandemic and are considered forms of forced SD. All of these have significant impact on the community and workforce. Careful consideration should be focused on their potential effectiveness and how to maintain critical supplies and infrastructure while limiting community interaction. For example, when public transportation is cancelled, other modes of transportation must be provided for emergency medical services and medical evaluation. The mandatory closure of public venues will have a direct and significant on worship services, as well as proselytizing efforts by missionaries.

References cited:

http://www.osha.gov/Publications/influenza_pandemic.html
<http://www.pandemicflu.gov/plan/community/commitigation.html>