

The World Health Organization has six phases of pandemic alert to assess the potential for a new global flu outbreak.

- Phase 1: There are no viruses circulating in animals that have been reported to cause infections in humans.
- Phase 2: An animal flu virus has caused infections in humans in the past and is considered to be a potential pandemic threat.
- Phase 3: An animal or mixed animal-human virus has caused occasional cases or small clusters of disease, but the virus does not spread easily. The world is currently in phase 3, with H5N1 bird flu viruses sporadically infecting humans and occasionally spreading from human to human.
- Phase 4: The new virus can cause sustained outbreaks and is adapting itself to human spread.
- Phase 5: The virus has spread into at least two countries and is causing even bigger outbreaks.
- Phase 6: More outbreaks in at least two regions of the world; the pandemic is underway.

A pandemic is a geographically widespread epidemic of a newly evolved disease for which humans have no natural immunity. The last pandemic flu was the Hong Kong flu in 1968-69, which killed more than 33,800 people in the USA and more than 1 million worldwide, the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) says.