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Flu pandemic could kill 150m warns UN

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A NEW flu pandemic is expected at any time and could kill up to 150 million people depending on action taken to control the bird flu outbreaks that have appeared in Asia, a senior UN public health expert warned yesterday.

Dr David Nabarro of the World Health Organisation called on governments to take immediate steps to address the threat at a news conference following his appointment as the new UN co-ordinator for avian and human influenza.

"We expect the next influenza pandemic to come at any time now, and it's likely to be caused by a mutant of the virus that is currently causing bird flu in Asia," he said.

The H5N1 strain of bird flu has swept through poultry populations in Asia since 2003, killing at least 65 people, mostly poultry workers, and resulting in the deaths of tens of millions of birds. The virus does not pass from person to person easily, but experts believe this could change if the virus mutates.

Dr Nabarro said it would be "extremely wrong" to ignore the serious possibility of a global outbreak. "The avian flu epidemic has to be controlled if we are to prevent a human influenza pandemic," he said.

The 1918 flu pandemic killed more than 40 million people, and there were subsequent pandemics in 1957 and 1968.

In a new pandemic, Dr Nabarro said "the range of deaths could be anything between five and 150 million".

"The work we're doing over the next few months on prevention and preparedness will make the difference between, for example, whether the next pandemic leads us in the direction of 150 million or five million," he said.

Dr Nabarro said key challenges were making sure governments gave the issue the right level of attention, communicating "the right level of concern without panic" and examining the effectiveness and supply of flu vaccines.

Web links

- [Dept of Health - pandemic flu](http://www.dh.gov.uk/PolicyAndGuidance/EmergencyPlanning/PandemicFlu/fs/en)
<http://www.dh.gov.uk/PolicyAndGuidance/EmergencyPlanning/PandemicFlu/fs/en>
- [WHO - Bird Flu fact sheet](http://www.who.int/csr/don/2004_01_15/en/)
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