

PANDEMIC INFLUENZA: FREQUENTLY ASKED QUESTIONS

SUMMER 2009



PANDEMIC INFLUENZA:

Prepare
your company
for the effects
of pandemic
flu

What is an influenza pandemic?

A pandemic is a global disease outbreak. An influenza occurs when a new influenza A virus emerges for which there is little or no immunity in the human population, begins to cause serious illness, and then spreads easily person-to-person worldwide.

How do pandemic viruses occur?

New influenza viruses emerge as a result of a process called antigenic shift, which causes a sudden and major change in influenza A viruses. These changes occur when proteins on the surface of the virus combine in new ways as a result of mutation or exchange of genetic material between multiple influenza viruses. If such changes result in a new influenza A virus subtype that can infect humans and spread easily person to person, an influenza virus can occur.

What age groups are most likely to be affected during an influenza pandemic?

Although scientists cannot predict the specific consequences of an influenza pandemic, it is likely that many age groups would be seriously affected. The greatest risk of hospitalization and death – as seen during the pandemics in 1957 and 1968 and during annual influenza – will be infants, the elderly, and those with underlying health conditions. However, in the 1918 pandemic, most deaths occurred in young adults. Few, if any, people would have immunity to the virus.

What are pandemic alert phases and what phase are we in?

The World Health Organization (WHO) developed an alert system to help inform the world about the seriousness of a pandemic. The alert system has six phases, with Phase 1 having the lowest risk of human cases and Phase 6 posing the greatest risk of pandemic. The world is currently in Phase 6 of the Pandemic Alert. This means that there is a new influenza virus subtype causing disease in humans, it is spreading easily from human to human in communities, and it is in more than WHO geographic region.

What information do you have about using masks during a pandemic?

Surgical mask and respirator use is one component of a system of infection control practices to prevent the spread of infection between infected and non-infected persons where pandemic influenza patients might receive health care services (e.g. hospitals, emergency departments, out-patient facilities, residential care facilities, emergency medical services, home health care delivery).

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 in the workplace or in public places.

FAQ TOPICS:

- Pandemic Influenza
- Planning and Response
- Workplace: Human Resources and Pandemic Planning
- Spread of H1N1

PANDEMIC INFLUENZA (continued from page 1)**What is the difference between a facemask and an N95 respirator?**

A facemask is a loose fitting, disposable device that creates a physical barrier between the mouth and nose of the wearer and potential contaminants in the immediate environment.

An N95 respirator is a respiratory protective device designed to achieve a very close facial fit and efficient filtration of airborne particles. In addition to blocking splashes, sprays and large droplets, the respirator is also designed to help prevent the wearer from breathing in small particles that may be in the air.

To work as expected, an N95 respirator requires a proper fit to your face. It is designed to fit tightly over your face. It is designed to fit tightly over your mouth and nose, with no gaps. And gaps will allow air to pass around and reach your nose, mouth, and lungs without being filtered.

Do N95 respirators reduce the chances of contracting the 2009 H1N1 flu virus?

When worn properly, N95 respirators help reduce your exposure to airborne germs. They do not provide complete protection from airborne germs and other contaminants, however. They are one part of an infection-control strategy that should also include frequent hand washing and staying home when sick.

Is it OK to re-use or share a disposable N95 respirator?

Although scientists cannot predict the specific consequences of an influenza pandemic, it is likely that many age groups would be seriously affected. The greatest risk of hospitalization and death – as seen during the pandemics in 1957 and 1968 and during annual influenza – will be infants, the elderly, and those with underlying health conditions. However, in the 1918 pandemic, most deaths occurred in young adults. Few, if any, people would have immunity to the virus.

What are pandemic alert phases and what phase are we in?

Disposable N95 respirators are not intended to be used more than once. They should also never be shared. Their protective capabilities cannot be assured when they are reused either by your self or another person. Perhaps more importantly, by sharing, one may inadvertently be exposing another person to infectious material.

It is important to understand that if you are exposed to infectious material while wearing an N95 respirator your respirator should be considered contaminated. After you remove it and dispose of it properly, wash your hands thoroughly.

**N95 Mask****Protect Against the Seasonal Flu:
Get a Flu Shot!****PLANNING AND RESPONSE:****How would a pandemic flu affect communities and businesses?**

If a severe influenza pandemic occurs, many people could become sick at the same time and would be unable to go to work. Many would stay at home to care for sick family members. Schools and businesses might close to try to prevent disease spread. Large group gatherings might be canceled. Public transportation might be scarce. These are examples of challenges that local communities, schools, civic organizations, and businesses will have to work on together to plan for a pandemic response.

PLANNING AND RESPONSE (continued from page 2)

What is community mitigation for a flu pandemic?

“Community mitigation” refers to the actions that communities and Federal, State, and local governments will take to reduce the effects of a flu pandemic.

What actions can be taken to help slow the spread of a pandemic?

These actions may include:

- Asking sick people to stay home and away from others.
- Asking household members of a sick person to also stay home.
- Dismissing children from school.
- Closing child care facilities to protect children, and
- Limiting direct contact between people.

Other protective measures include:

- Hand washing.
- Covering coughs and sneezes.
- Wearing face masks (i.e. loose fitting disposable masks that cover the nose and mouth) and respirators, and
- Using antiviral drugs and vaccines.

How are partnerships a vital part of community mitigation efforts?

Working together:

- Governments, communities, and individuals must work together to prepare for and to respond to an influenza pandemic. Your congregation or organization does not need to do everything by itself. Instead, it should be one part of a community, local, regional, and national collaborative effort.
- You should identify potential partners and meet with them to learn about their planning and to educate them about your organization’s plans , capabilities, and practices.
- You should develop collaborative efforts to keep your organizations running during an emergency. For example, large organizations can support small ones, or several small organizations can work together.



“Don’t hesitate to contact your health care provider for specific care information for yourself and your family.”

WORKPLACE: HUMAN RESOURCE POLICIES AND PANDEMIC PLANNING

Must an employer grant leave to an employee who is sick or who is caring for a family member?

An employee who is sick or whose family members may be entitled to leave under the Family and Medical Leave Act (FMLA) under certain conditions. The FMLA entitles eligible employees of covered employers to take up to 12 weeks of unpaid, job-protected leave in a designated 12-month leave year for specified family and medical reasons which may include the flu where complications arise that create a “serious health condition” as defined by the FMLA. Employees on FMLA leave are entitled to the continuation of group health insurance coverage under the same conditions as coverage would have been provided if the employee had been continuously employed during the leave period.

Continued on next page

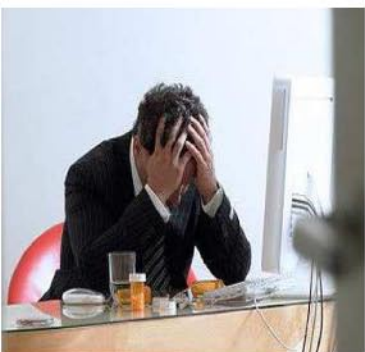


WORKPLACE: (continued from page 3)

Must an employer grant leave to an employee who is sick or who is caring for a family member? (continued)

Workers who are ill with pandemic influenza or have a family member with influenza are urged to stay home to minimize the spread of the pandemic. Employers are encouraged to support these and other community mitigation strategies and should consider flexible leave policies for their employees.

NOTE: Not all of the employment laws referenced apply to all employers or all employees. As an overall matter, employers should be guided in their relationship with their employees not only by federal employment law, but by their own employee handbooks, manuals, and contracts (including bargaining agreements), and by any applicable state or local laws.



Is an employer required by law to provide paid sick leave to employees who are out of work because they have pandemic influenza, have been exposed to a family member with influenza or are caring for a family member with influenza?

Federal law does not require employers to provide **paid leave** to employees who are sick with pandemic flu, have been exposed to someone with the flu or are caring for someone with the flu. Certain state or local laws may have different requirements, which should be independently considered by employers when determining their obligation to provide paid sick leave.

If the leave qualifies as FMLA protected leave, the statute allows the employee to elect or the employer to require the substitution of paid sick and paid vacation/personal leave in some circumstances. Employers should encourage employees that are ill with pandemic influenza to stay home and should consider flexible leave policies for their employees.

What legal responsibility do employers have to allow parents or care givers time off from work to care for the sick or children who have been dismissed from school?

Covered employers must abide by the FMLA as any applicable state FMLA laws. An employee who is sick, or whose family members are sick, may be entitled to leave under the FMLA. The FMLA entitles eligible employees of covered employers to take up to 12 weeks of unpaid, job-protected leave in a designated 12-month leave year for specified family and medical reasons which may include the flu where complications arise that create a "serious health condition" as defined by the FMLA.



There is currently no federal law covering employees who take off from work to care for healthy children, and employers are not required by federal law to provide leave to employees caring for dependents that have been dismissed from school or child care. However, given the potential for significant illness under some pandemic influenza scenarios, employers should review their leave policies to consider providing increased flexibility to their employees and their families. Remember that federal law mandates that any flexible leave policies must be administered in a manner that does not discriminate against employees because of race, color, sex, national origin, religion, age (40 and over), disability, or veteran status.

SPREAD OF H1N1

How do you catch H1N1 flu?

H1N1 flu is contracted through contact with the virus that causes the illness. Contact with persons who are ill with H1N1 is the most common method of transmission. This flu variant is transmitted in the same ways the seasonal flu is transmitted, through coughing or sneezing of infected people. This activity spreads droplets of virus throughout the area which can then be contacted by others.

Can people catch H1N1 flu from eating pork?

No. H1N1 influenza viruses are not transmitted by food. You can not get H1N1 influenza from eating pork or pork products. Eating properly handled and cooked pork and pork products is safe. Cooking pork to an internal temperature of 160°F kills the H1N1 virus as it does other bacteria and viruses.

What surfaces are most likely to be sources of contamination by the H1N1 virus?

Germs can be spread when a person touches something that is contaminated with germs and then touches his or her eyes, nose or mouth. Droplets from a cough or sneeze of an infected person can move through the air. Germs can be spread when a person touches respiratory droplets from another person on a surface like a desk, for example, and then touches their own eyes, mouth or nose before washing their hands.

How long can an infected person spread H1N1 influenza to others?

Infected people may be able to infect others beginning 1 day before symptoms develop and up to 7 or more days after becoming ill. This means that you may be able to pass on the flu to someone else before you know you are sick, as well as while you are sick.

Are there medicines to treat H1N1 flu?

Yes, CDC recommends the use of oseltamivir (brand name Tamiflu) or zanamivir (brand name Relenza) for the treatment and/or prevention of infection with H1N1 influenza viruses. Antiviral drugs are prescription medicines that fight against the flu by keeping flu viruses from replicating in your body. If you get sick, antiviral drugs can make your illness milder and make you feel better faster. They may also prevent serious flu complications. For treatment, antiviral drugs work best if started soon after getting sick (within 2 days of symptoms).

What can I do to protect myself from getting sick?

- Cover your nose and mouth with a tissue or your elbow when you cough or sneeze. Throw the tissue in the trash after you use it.
- Wash your hands often with soap and water, especially after you cough or sneeze. Alcohol based hand cleaners are also effective.
- Avoid touching your eyes, nose or mouth. Germs spread this way.
- Try to avoid close contact with sick people.
- If you get sick with influenza, CDC recommends that you stay home from work or school and limit contact with others to keep from infecting them.

