

H1N1-8 steps to mitigate the threat

While there's no doubt the H1N1 influenza will return in force to the northern hemisphere, just how severe the resulting illnesses will be remains uncertain.

The US Centers for Disease Control (CDC) expect more communities may be affected this fall and winter than in the spring and summer 2009, with wider transmission of the flu and possibly greater impact. Add to this the effects of seasonal influenza viruses.

Employers can play a key role in protecting worker health and safety, minimizing the risk of business disruption, and limiting the effects of influenza outbreaks on the community and the economy. Here's how.

- **Determine normal seasonal absenteeism rates** and watch for any unusual increases in absenteeism through the fall and winter.
- **Assess essential business functions now** to determine at what threshold of absenteeism those functions would be threatened. Use this information to plan measures to protect continuity as absenteeism approaches those thresholds.
- **Work with public health partners** so that timely and accurate information can guide your response. The intensity of an outbreak may differ according to geographic location. Also, consider working with public health and community leaders on ways to improve accessibility to vaccinations.
- **Advise sick employees at work to go home.** CDC recommends that workers who appear to have an influenza-like illness upon arrival or who become ill during the day be promptly separated from other workers and sent home.
- **Keep sick workers home.** This is one of the best ways to reduce the spread of influenza. CDC recommends that workers with symptoms of influenza-like illness stay home and not return to work until at least 24 hours after their fever has dissipated. Note: some people with influenza, including those ill with H1N1, do not have fever.
- **Prepare to institute flexible workplace and leave policies.** Be prepared if schools dismiss students or child care programs close. Absenteeism spikes resulting from workers who are sick, or must stay home to care for ill family members or children if schools are closed, will affect your firm's functioning.
- **Share your pandemic response measures with all employees,** and explain what human resources policies, workplace and leave flexibilities, and pay and benefits will be available to them.
- **Share best practices with other firms** in your community, especially members of your supply chain).

Slowing the spread of influenza

Influenza viruses are thought to spread mainly in respiratory droplets of coughs and sneezes. Consider adopting the following measures.

- Distribute messages on the importance of covering coughs and sneezes with a tissue or, in the absence of a tissue, one's sleeve.
- Place posters in the worksite that encourages cough and sneeze etiquette.
- Provide tissues and no-touch disposal receptacles for use by employees.
- Promote hand hygiene. Encourage employees to wash their hands often with soap and water or use an alcohol-based hand cleaner, especially after coughing or sneezing.

Place posters that encourage hand hygiene. Provide soap and water and alcohol-based hand sanitizers in the workplace.

- Clean surfaces and items that are more likely to have frequent hand contact, especially all commonly touched surfaces in the workplace, such as workstations, countertops, and doorknobs.
- Encourage employees, especially those at greater risk of complications, to get vaccinated for seasonal as well as H1N1 influenza when the vaccines become available. Offer opportunities on site for influenza vaccination, or consider giving employees time off to get vaccinated elsewhere. People at greater risk include pregnant women; children under 5 years of age; those who are 65 years or older; and adults and children with chronic lung disease (such as asthma), heart disease, diabetes, diseases that suppress the immune system and other chronic medical conditions.

If the severity increases

Consider increasing social distancing in the workplace. The goal should be for at least 2 metres of distance between people at most times. This is not a simple or easy strategy, and typically requires considerable flexibility. Measures may include

- avoiding crowded work settings
- cancelling business-related face-to-face meetings
- spacing workers farther apart
- cancelling non-essential travel
- increasing use of teleworking
- using staggered shifts to allow fewer workers in the workplace at the same time
- cancelling non-essential business travel
- seeking out back-up suppliers