

# Workplace Influenza Planning

## This year it's a different flu season.

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*The Pandemic (H1N1) 2009 influenza virus has spread across the world and is expected to be part of the upcoming flu season. It is essential to have strategies in place to prevent the spread of influenza in all workplaces.*

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### *What is Influenza?*

Influenza (commonly known as “the flu”) is a contagious respiratory illness that is caused by a group of viruses (influenza types A, B, and C). These viruses circulate and cause seasonal outbreaks of influenza every year in Canada.

Common symptoms of influenza are: fever, headache, chills, muscle aches, extreme exhaustion, fatigue, stuffy nose, sneezing, sore throat, chest discomfort and cough (children may also experience nausea, vomiting and diarrhea). People who contract the flu may experience mild to severe illness. Most healthy individuals are able to recover from the flu. Some people, such as older adults, younger children and people with certain health conditions are more at risk for complications. In some instances the illness can be fatal. As a result, influenza is an ongoing public health threat.

Influenza is transmitted from person to person through direct contact primarily when people infected with influenza cough or sneeze and droplets come into contact with the eyes, nose or mouth of another person. Influenza is indirectly transmitted when people touch contaminated hands, surfaces or objects and then touch their face.

The virus can survive on nonporous surfaces such as doorknobs, countertops or toys for up to 48 hours. People who become infected with influenza are able to transmit the virus for 24 hours before symptoms appear and for up to five days after symptoms appear. Children can be infectious for up to seven days after symptoms appear.

### *What is an Influenza Pandemic?*

An influenza pandemic is a world-wide outbreak of influenza that occurs when a new influenza A virus emerges, to which the population has little or no immunity. It may spread easily from person to person, across the country and throughout the world and is expected to cause serious illness and death. It is not known beforehand what age group will be most affected by an influenza pandemic,

as it is unpredictable and can happen at any time of the year. Pandemics of the past have shown that younger people tend to be impacted with high rates of illness.

### *What Does that Mean for Workplaces?*

An influenza pandemic has the potential to infect many people in Huron County. Unlike most emergencies currently addressed in emergency contingency plans, the effect of an influenza pandemic on individual communities may be prolonged – weeks to months when compared to minutes-to-hours observed in most disasters.

Absenteeism may be an issue for all workplaces as employees become ill or are caring for ill family members. People under age 50 appear to be most impacted by illness rates of the H1N1 strain of influenza.

The availability of supplies and services may be disrupted or reduced because of personnel shortages. Businesses should consider having one month of supplies on hand.

An influenza pandemic cannot be prevented but present-day planning can lessen the impact.

### *What Should Workplaces Do?*

#### **1. Hand Hygiene**

- Provide adequate supplies of soap and water and alcohol based hand rubs in the workplace. Hand washing with soap and water for at least 15 seconds is the most effective way to prevent the spread of influenza and other germs that can make people sick. Alcohol based hand rubs with 60-90% alcohol should be placed in multiple locations in the workplace to encourage hand hygiene.
- Everyone should practice proper hand hygiene after touching surfaces that others may have touched and especially before eating or drinking or preparing meals, after using the washroom and after sneezing, coughing or wiping their nose.

- Everyone should be encouraged to avoid touching their eyes, nose or mouth with their hands as influenza can spread this way.
- Place posters in the workplace that encourage hand hygiene. Proper hand washing instructions can be found at: [www.health.gov.on.ca/en/public/programs/emu/pan\\_flu/employ/handwash\\_tech.pdf](http://www.health.gov.on.ca/en/public/programs/emu/pan_flu/employ/handwash_tech.pdf)

## 2. Practice Respiratory Etiquette

- Everyone should cough or sneeze into their elbow or upper sleeve and not into their hands.
- If tissues are used to cover coughs and sneezes they should be thrown away immediately after use, followed by hand hygiene.

## 3. Disinfect Frequently Touched Surfaces Often

- The influenza virus can survive for up to 48 hours on some surfaces. Frequent cleaning of commonly touched surfaces / objects can help reduce the spread of the virus. Commercially available cleaning products are all that is needed to kill the influenza virus.
- It is recommended that workplaces frequently clean high traffic and common areas with particular attention to handles, buttons, switches, handrails, push bars and countertops.

## 4. Stay Home if You are Sick

- Employees who are ill with influenza should stay home. Employers should anticipate that employees could be absent for five days after onset of their symptoms.
- Employers are encouraged to make sure their sick leave policies for employees are up to date and to communicate these policies to their employees.
- Wearing masks, eye protection and other personal protective equipment is not recommended at this time.
- Employers should have a Business Continuity Plan and determine what functions, operations, or people are essential. In the event of increased absenteeism, staff may need to be reallocated to do other tasks. Employers should consider training staff in advance to assist in reassigning staff.
- Staff who are prepared at home to deal with emergencies and illness may be more likely to come to work. Staff should be encouraged to develop personal and family plans to address issues such as childcare or eldercare. Alternate arrangements may need to be planned ahead of time.
- Encourage all staff to get influenza vaccines when they become available.

## Where Can I Get More Information

Many professional associations have developed resource materials for their member organizations. If you have a provincial or national association, check with them to see what pandemic planning resources they have that you can access.

Open For Business - a disaster planning resource for the small business owner: [www.iclr.org](http://www.iclr.org)

Ontario Chamber of Commerce Pandemic Planning Toolkit: <http://occ.on.ca/Policy/Reports/281>

Canadian Centre for Occupational Health and Safety Pandemic Planning: <http://www.ccohs.ca/pandemic/subject/businesscontinuityplannin.html>

Pandemic Flu.gov Workplace Planning: <http://www.pandemicflu.gov/plan/workplaceplanning/index.html>

A Guide to Business Continuity Planning; Public Safety Canada <http://www.publicsafety.gc.ca/prg/em/gds/bcp-en.asp>

Please check out the Huron County Health Unit Website for more general information on influenza, pandemic influenza and H1N1. Our site has links to direct you to federal and provincial resources and updates as well as downloadable resources and tools: [www.huroncounty.ca/health](http://www.huroncounty.ca/health)