

RiskTopics

Influenza outbreak: What your business should be doing December, 2015

Regardless of what course an influenza outbreak takes, you should consider the impact it could have on your business.

Introduction

It is difficult to judge the seriousness of the influenza season each year. It may be mild, or it may be widespread, like the H1N1 pandemic of 2009-2010. No matter the seriousness of the outbreak, its impact on your business should be considered. Due to medical advances, today's flu outbreaks have not taken the human toll they once did. However, the financial impact on business and global trade is much greater than ever before.

Infectious disease outbreaks requiring extended quarantine and isolation of large portions of the population can significantly affect global trade. Whether you are a global company or a local retail business, extended worker absenteeism due to an influenza outbreak could affect every part of your business.

Guidance

Steps your business can take now

- Develop communication and employee packages. Keep your employees informed with general information on the flu and what your company is doing to keep them healthy. Encourage employees who have not received flu vaccination to get one promptly. There are many good resources available for information on the health aspects of influenza at the U.S. Centers for Disease Control website (www.cdc.gov). One CDC source with education materials available for downloading is: www.cdc.gov/flu/freeresources/index.htm. Educational information and materials may also be available from your state or local health department.
- Develop a committee to review, plan and oversee your company's influenza outbreak response and how you will minimize the spread of communicable disease in the workplace.
- Identify critical processes and functions that must continue for your business to remain viable. Can some be automated or managed remotely or with fewer employees?
- Evaluate critical suppliers and customers, and identify suppliers that provide critical raw materials, component parts or essential services. Develop a contingency plan for how you would operate if they were not available.

Also, consider that you may be a critical supplier to your customers. What do you need to do to meet their needs?

- Identify essential employees or expertise to find ways to protect critical employees through isolation, remote work or, if there is enough lead time, medical intervention, such as vaccination.
- Review sick leave and disability leave policies as well as any government-mandated leave policies. Encourage healthy employees to come to work and ill employees to stay home unless mandates are in place.
- Review physical and security considerations. Look around your workplace and consider promoting social distancing (three to six feet) between employee workstations to minimize potential infections.
- Consider a decision matrix to determine when to implement the specific portions of your influenza outbreak plan. This decision matrix strategy may include disease factors, such as the outbreak spread and the severity of the influenza strain; regional and community factors, such as the level of healthcare and public health support available; and individual company factors, such as the level of interdependence of your sites and how dependent your business is on suppliers and customers. There may also be unique factors to your business.

Good health habits can help stop germs – The single best way to prevent seasonal flu is to get vaccinated each year, but good health habits like covering your mouth when you cough and washing your hands often can help stop the spread of germs and prevent respiratory illnesses like the flu. There also are flu antiviral drugs that can be used to treat and prevent the flu.

The following are recommended hygiene practices directly from the U.S. Centers for Disease Control <http://www.cdc.gov/flu/protect/habits.htm>.

1. Avoid close contact with people who are sick. When you are sick, keep your distance from others to help protect them from getting sick too.
2. Stay home from work, school and errands when you are sick. You will help prevent others from catching your illness.
3. Cover your mouth and nose with a tissue when coughing or sneezing. It may prevent those around you from getting sick.
4. Washing your hands often will help protect you from germs.
5. Avoid touching your eyes, nose or mouth. Germs are often spread when a person touches something that is contaminated with germs and then touches his or her eyes, nose or mouth.
6. Practice other good health habits. Get plenty of sleep, be physically active, manage your stress, drink plenty of fluids and eat nutritious food.

Key websites for further information

- U.S. Centers for Disease Control: www.cdc.gov
- World Health Organization: www.who.int
- U.S. Government influenza site: www.flu.gov
- U.S. Occupation Safety & Health Administration: www.OSHA.gov
- Health Canada: www.hc-sc.gc.ca
- UK Health Protection Agency: <http://www.hpa.org.uk/>
- U.S. CDC guidance for business: <http://www.cdc.gov/flu/business/>
- U.S. OSHA guidance on preparing workplaces for influenza outbreak: <https://www.osha.gov/dts/guidance/flu/index.html>

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