

Planning For A Pandemic: CCOHS' Guide To Staying Safe

By: The Canadian Centre for Occupational Health
and Safety (CCOHS)

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Every few decades there is a radical change in the influenza virus. This large change means many more people will be affected as they may not be immune to this disease. If a large number of people become ill, a pandemic may occur.

Recently, the world has witnessed a glimpse of how widespread the harm can be from an infectious disease. Outbreaks of H1N1 flu, SARS, and avian flu have shown how poor planning or a lack of knowledge can lead to employee illness and fatalities, public uncertainty and fear, reduced economic activity, and chaos in the home and workplace. Planning for, being informed about, and knowing what to do in a pandemic can help minimize the impact in our daily lives, work, and activities.

Touching a contaminated object or surface, and then touching your own mouth, eyes or nose before washing your hands can easily transmit the influenza virus. There are several things you can do to reduce your chances of getting sick with the flu, and to avoid passing it to others if you are sick:

- Practice good hygiene steps such as cough etiquette – cover your mouth and nose when coughing or sneezing.
- Use tissues when you cough or sneeze to contain respiratory droplets.
- Wash your hands frequently, especially after contact with respiratory droplets and after touching contaminated objects.

Good personal hygiene practices will reduce the risk of infection.

Employers can help reduce the impact of the influenza virus in the workplace in a number of ways. Here are five things your employees need to know:

- Do you have a business continuity plan? If so, make sure to communicate its origins and content with your employees so they know what steps your workplace has in place for a pandemic and ensure all parties understand their role in this plan.
- Offer training and education seminars about pandemic planning and preventing the spread of germs to your employees and encourage attendance. Also, during a pandemic, it will be essential for employees to cover some of the duties normally done by co-workers. Be receptive to cross-training and help train others to do aspects of your job as well.
- Create and communicate any policies your workplace has for sick leave or for caring for their family. Knowing what options are available ahead of time will help employees know what arrangements need to be made.
- Promote the healthy hygiene tips as noted above to your employees. Encourage them to wash their hands the right way, and at the right times (after using the washroom, before eating, and after touching common surfaces such as doorknobs, railings, telephones, etc.). Also remember do not touch your eyes, mouth, or nose as this helps the virus enter your body more easily. Follow personal hygiene steps such as cough etiquette to help slow the spread of the virus.
- If you or your employees have the flu, or think you might, stay home. Staying home when sick, and hand washing, are the most effective ways to help slow the spread of a virus.

During a pandemic, many issues may come up such as what is the best way to keep your business operational, and at the same time, knowing how to protect your employees from the effects of a major influenza outbreak. Business will be affected by staff absenteeism as well as shortages of supplies and customers. To create your own business continuity plan, and ideas on how to overcome them, or for more information on pandemic planning, please visit <http://www.ccohs.ca/pandemic>.