

# How a severe pandemic influenza could affect workplaces

On June 11, 2009, the World Health Organization (WHO) signaled that a global pandemic of novel influenza A (H1N1) was underway. Since that time, the new H1N1 virus has continued to spread, with the number of countries reporting cases of novel H1N1 nearly doubling. The Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) anticipates that there will be more cases, more hospitalizations and more deaths associated with this pandemic in the United States into the fall and winter. The novel H1N1 virus, in conjunction with regular seasonal influenza viruses, poses the potential to cause significant illness with associated hospitalizations and deaths during the U.S. influenza season.



It is important to prepare for the possibility of a more severe outbreak of the H1N1 virus this fall that may be both widespread and extended. Multiple areas of the United States and other countries may be affected at the same time, with multiple waves of outbreaks in the same geographic area. Each outbreak could last from 6 to 8 weeks, with waves of outbreaks that may occur over a year or more. Your workplace could experience:

- **Absenteeism** - A pandemic could affect as many as 40 percent of the workforce during periods of peak influenza illness. Employees could be absent because they are sick, must care for sick family members or for children if schools or day care centers are closed. Some employees may not come to work for fear of contracting the illness, or in rare cases, if an employee is severely ill and dies, the employer may not be notified.
- **Change in patterns of commerce** - During a pandemic, consumer demand for items related to infection control is likely to increase dramatically, while consumer interest in other goods may decline. Consumers may also change the ways in which they shop as a result of the pandemic, such as: shopping at off-peak hours to reduce contact with other people; showing increased interest in home delivery services, such as using drive-through service to reduce person-to-person contact.
- **Interrupted supply/delivery** - Shipments of items from those geographic areas severely affected by the pandemic may be delayed or cancelled.

## Plan ahead to reduce the impact on your business

As an employer, you have a key role in protecting your employees' health and safety, and limiting the impact of an influenza pandemic on the economy and society. Having a disaster plan in place that includes pandemic preparedness is critical.

The good news is that there is a wealth of resources available to help you create a plan. For example, the Department of Health and Human Services (HHS) and the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) have developed a checklist for large businesses that identifies important, specific activities large businesses can do now to prepare. The checklist sections include:

- Plan for the impact of a pandemic on your business
- Plan for the impact of a pandemic on your employees and customers
- Establish policies to be implemented during a pandemic
- Allocate resources to protect your employees and customers during a pandemic
- Communicate to and educate your employees
- Coordinate with external organizations and help your community

The most important part of pandemic planning is to work with your employees, local and state agencies and other employers to develop cooperative pandemic plans to maintain your operations and keep your employees and the public safe. Share what you know, be open to ideas from your employees, then identify and share effective health practices with other employers in your community and with your local chamber of commerce.

#### To learn more

Important tools for pandemic flu planning for employers and employees are located at the following Web sites:

**[www.pandemicflu.gov](http://www.pandemicflu.gov)**

**[www.cdc.gov/h1n1flu/business/toolkit](http://www.cdc.gov/h1n1flu/business/toolkit)**

**[www.cdc.gov/h1n1flu/business/guidance](http://www.cdc.gov/h1n1flu/business/guidance)**

The checklist for large business mentioned above can be found at:

**[www.cdc.gov/flu/pandemic/pdf/businessChecklist.pdf](http://www.cdc.gov/flu/pandemic/pdf/businessChecklist.pdf)**.

**MEDICA®**

Source: *Guidance on Preparing Workplaces for an Influenza Pandemic*, OSHA publication 3327-05R 2009, available online at [www.osha.gov/Publications/influenza\\_pandemic.html](http://www.osha.gov/Publications/influenza_pandemic.html).

COM5558-40809

© 2009 Medica. Medica® is a registered service mark of Medica Health Plans. "Medica" refers to the family of health plan businesses that includes Medica Health Plans, Medica Health Plans of Wisconsin, Medica Insurance Company, Medica Self-Insured, and Medica Health Management, LLC.