

Preparing Your Workplace for Flu & Other Infectious Illness Outbreaks



What's At Stake

Although seasonal flu and other infectious illnesses can bring your operations to a wheezing halt, surveys continue to show that the majority of employers don't take the necessary steps to prepare. As OHS manager, it's incumbent on you to work with your HR director to ensure your company has a plan for dealing with potentially crippling outbreaks. Here are 9 things to do.

What the Law Requires

OHS laws don't specifically mention flu or other infectious illnesses; it's one of those unnamed hazards employers are supposed to address as part of their general duty to take "reasonable" measures to guard against foreseeable risks.

9 Steps to Comply

Reasonable measures required includes 9 basic things:

Step #1: Getting Organized

Don't try to prepare the company for flu season on your own. Form a committee to spearhead the planning efforts. This

committee should be led by a senior member of management and include:

IS IT A COLD OR THE FLU'

COLD	SYMPTOM	FLU
Rare	Fever	Usual high fever (102°F/39°C to 104°F/40°C); sudden onset; lasts 3-4 days
Rare	Headache	Usual'can be severe
Sometimes, mild	General aches and pains	Usual'often severe
Sometimes, mild	Fatigue and weakness	Usual, severe, can last 2-3 weeks or more
Unusual	Extreme fatigue	Usual, early onset, can be severe
Common	Runny, stuffy nose	Common
Common	Sneezing	Sometimes
Common	Sore throat	Sore throat
Sometimes, mild to moderate	Chest discomfort, coughing	Usual, can be severe
Can lead to sinus congestion or earache	Complications	Can lead to pneumonia and respiratory failure; can worsen a current chronic condition; can be life-threatening
COLD	PREVENTION	FLU
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> •wash hands Frequently •cough/sneeze into your sleeve 		<ul style="list-style-type: none"> •annual vaccination Frequently •wash hands frequently •cough/sneeze into your sleeve
Source: Public Health Agency of Canada		

- The OHS director (or other person in charge of emergency planning at your site);
- The HR director;
- The workplace joint health and safety committee (JHSC) and/or health and safety rep (Rep); and
- Someone familiar with labour issues.

The JHSC or Rep should establish contacts in each business unit to monitor workers' health. It should also designate someone to stay in touch with the local Ministry of Health and other reliable public sources of information about the flu or

other public health situation in Canada, your jurisdiction and your community.

Step #2: Assessing the Risks

The JHSC and/or Rep should also participate in assessing the risk of workers getting the flu and the impact it would have on operations if a significant number of workers got sick at once. For example, could a flu outbreak threaten the viability of any unit or facility? Also assess the impact that an outbreak could have on the company even if its workers don't fall ill. For example, could the government take over parts of your workforce or facility to perform emergency services?

Step #3: Protect Workers' Health

The best way to handle a potential flu outbreak is to take steps to keep workers from getting sick in the first place. So, educate workers on personal hygiene and other measures for guarding against the risk of infection, including:

- Hand washing;
- "Cough etiquette," i.e., coughing in the crook of the arm as opposed to the hands;
- Social distancing;
- Proper use of PPE, such as facemasks and respirators;
- Vaccination; and
- Precautions for workers planning to travel to areas affected by infectious disease outbreak.

It's important to encourage your workers to get vaccinated. In fact, consider establishing flu clinics in your workplace, especially if you have onsite medical staff. Workers are more likely to get vaccinated if it's convenient. It's also a good idea to post the location of hospitals, clinics, public health authorities and other health resources in the workplace.

Step #4: Adjusting Your OHS & HR Policies

For example, ensure that policies and practices for obtaining, disclosing and using workers' medical information, such as to verify their illness and determine their needs for accommodation, comply with privacy laws. And make sure that supervisors understand how workers' right to refuse dangerous work applies in the context of exposure to the flu or other infectious illnesses.

Step #5: Creating a Business Continuity Plan

Every company should have a [business continuity plan](#) setting out the steps it will take to keep operations going in the event of an emergency, including infectious illness outbreak. For example, determine if you can temporarily do without a unit suffering heavy flu losses or make transfers or other provisions to maintain operations.

Step #6: Preparing for Service & Supply Disruptions

Even if your own workers stay healthy, outbreaks at companies you depend on, such as suppliers and truckers, can disrupt or even shut down operations. So, it's critical to identify alternative sources for those goods and services and/or start building (or adding to existing) stockpiles and reserves.

Step #7: Preparing for Absences

You also need a plan to deal with multiple absences. Determine the minimum staff you need to maintain critical business function and identify the credentials workers need to fill those functions, e.g., certification to operate powered mobile equipment.

Step #8: Establishing Lines of Communication with Workers

Establish reliable channels you can use to communicate key information to workers, such as symptoms of a new strain of the flu and the availability of vaccines.

Step #9: Establishing Lines of Communication with Business

Principles

Identify the company's key customers, partners, suppliers and other business relations and establish means of communicating with them in the event of a flu outbreak

FLU PREPAREDNESS CHECKLIST: [Click here](#), to download a Flu & Infectious Illness Preparedness Checklist that you can use to create a plan for your company.