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H1N1 Survival Guide

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The H1N1 pandemic has the business community on edge. Will the frightening scenario of empty offices and unserved clients come to pass? Or will flu season come and go as usual, with minimal disruption? The fact is, the impact for employers can be very real, whatever the outcome. In the spirit of 'forewarned, forearmed,' *Benefits Canada* has compiled an extensive array of pandemic planning material from a range of experts, bringing you the most relevant, up-to-date information to assist your decision making in these difficult times.

H1N1 101

September 28, 2009 | Jody White



With the change in season, organizations across North America are bracing for a possible second wave of the H1N1 flu virus. While there are many aspects of this pandemic for employers to consider, a firm grasp of the fundamentals of H1N1 will guide the pandemic planning process.

The facts

The Canadian Food Inspection Agency theorizes that pigs contracted the virus from an infected human in Canada. Upon achieving human-to human transmission, H1N1 can cause an influenza pandemic. Even an influenza event with a low percentage of lethality can cause a large number of deaths if it infects vast areas of the population over time.

Influenza is transmitted from person to person when germs enter the nose and/or throat. Coughs and sneezes release germs into the air, where they can be breathed in by others. Germs can also rest on hard surfaces like counters and doorknobs, where they can be transmitted to the respiratory system when someone touches his or her mouth or nose.

The H1N1 virus can live outside the body on hard surfaces (such as stainless steel and plastic) for 24 to 48 hours and on soft surfaces (such as cloth, paper and tissues) for 8 to 12 hours or less. It can infect a person for up to 2 to 8 hours after being deposited on hard surfaces, and only for up to a few minutes after being deposited on soft surfaces.

The World Health Organization (WHO) has raised the pandemic alert level to Phase 6, the Pandemic Phase. To date, the total number of deaths due to virus in Canada stands at 78, the majority occurring in Ontario and Quebec.

There are two antivirals available: oseltamivir (Tamiflu) and zanamivir (Relenza). A vaccine is expected to be available in November 2009.

What employers can do

According to a report by the U.S. Conference Board, *Key Questions in Pandemic Planning*, the three main areas of

activity where infection control steps must be taken are planning for business, planning to protect people and establishing policies.

Specifically, effective infection control measures include:

- hand hygiene;
- cough etiquette;
- isolation of sick people;
- voluntary home quarantine;
- environmental cleaning; and
- social distancing measures, including the cancellation of mass gatherings, alternatives to face-to-face contact at work and increasing the physical distance between people.

Recommendations to employers include the following:

- Encourage respiratory etiquette and develop a culture that supports this during a seasonal flu and other respiratory tract infections. This will provide immediate benefits later.
- Use posters, provide information on respiratory etiquette, and make tissues and appropriate materials for tissue disposal available.
- Use restrooms to spread information and to make alcohol gels available to encourage hand-washing outside of restrooms during the period of respiratory tract infection.
- Promote seasonal influenza vaccination among employees and their family members. Host vaccine clinics if possible.
- Educate your workforce on these infection control measures.