

HR Initiatives Ltd

Information for retained clients

DATE: 19TH JUNE 2009

PURPOSE OF THIS COMMUNICATION

This information has been produced for HRi clients to assist you with the human resources planning requirement in the event of a flu epidemic. Various sources are referred to throughout the document which is intended to provide you with an overview and sources of further information to help you plan ahead. This guidance is not exhaustive and clients are advised to update themselves from the Government websites as and when new information becomes available.

The influenza strain known as "Swine Flu" (Influenza A-H1N1) has now been confirmed in a number of countries including Mexico, United States, Austria, Canada, Germany, Israel, Netherlands, New Zealand, Spain, Switzerland, and the United Kingdom. This influenza is currently behaving in a similar manner to more common influenza infections.

As of the current date and on the basis of available evidence and expert assessments of the evidence, the scientific criteria for an influenza pandemic have been met. The Director-General of WHO has therefore decided to raise the level of influenza pandemic alert from phase 5 to phase 6 which is classed as moderate according to the WHO definition. This reflects the fact that there are sustained outbreaks in several regions monitored by WHO.

Employers are advised to make plans now for critical cover, ensuring the health safety and wellbeing of their staff and customers and to prepare for between 25% up to 50% reduction in staff at the peak of the crisis.

We will continue to monitor key external health authority and government actions.

SIGNS AND SYMPTOMS OF SWINE FLU

The NHS have advised that a fever, often accompanied by shortness of breath are symptomatic of swine flu. These may be accompanied by:

- Headache
- Tiredness
- Chills
- Aching muscles
- Sore throat
- Runny nose
- Sneezing
- Loss of appetite

Incubation ranges between 2-4 days and people are at their most infectious soon after they develop symptoms.

Flu is passed from person to person via sneezing or coughing within a short distance; touching or shaking hands of an infected person, touching surfaces which have been contaminated with flu virus from an infected person e.g. keyboards, phones, surfaces, door handles and then touching your nose/eyes/mouth without washing of hands.

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WHAT YOU NEED TO DO

The most important thing we want our employees to do to reduce the risk of spread of infection is to practice good personal hygiene habits such as:

- Washing your hands as often as practical with soap and water, especially after coughing or sneezing. This removes germs from your skin and helps prevent diseases from spreading
- Washing hands before eating and drinking
- Washing shared utensils at work in hot soapy water before use
- Use waterless alcohol hand gels (containing at least 60% alcohol) when soap is not available and hands are not visibly dirty
- Cover your mouth and nose with a tissue when you cough or sneeze and put your used tissue in a wastebasket. If you don't have a tissue, cough or sneeze into your upper sleeve, not your hands

Any employee who develops flu like symptoms (cough, fever, sore throat, aches/pains, etc) is asked to seek prompt medical attention and to remain resting at home until the symptoms have passed. This is likely to be between 5 and 10 days on average. Co-workers and supervisors of employees who are at work with obvious symptoms should encourage those individuals to seek immediate external medical attention. If anyone is confirmed to have this specific infection we ask they remain away from the workplace for 7 days after diagnosis and until cleared by their treating medical practitioner.

Employees should be encouraged to remain at home if they are demonstrating signs or symptoms of flu until the symptoms have passed. Employers may wish to consider relaxing their absence monitoring during a pandemic outbreak.

Alternatives to face to face meetings should be considered e.g. conference calls, messaging, video links and large gatherings of staff should be avoided until the threat has passed. Home working may also be a consideration if staff cannot get into work or need to remain at home to care for a dependent.

Staff who have dependents may need time off to care for them and consideration should be given as to how staff can be supported and the care of dependents shared with other family members during an outbreak.

Employers can ensure that staff remain as healthy as possible by providing access to hand washing facilities and ensuring that soap dispensers are kept topped up and/or hand sanitisers are issued where access to soap/water is limited e.g. off site. Employers may wish to step up their cleaning of office premises to include surfaces, door handles, phones and desks.

Face masks may be necessary where contact with infected persons is inevitable e.g. if providing support services. Face masks should be binned after use and hands washed before eating. You may also wish to consider other steps you could take to minimise contact with an infected person.

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Employers should issue staff with guidance about good personal hygiene 'catch it, bin it, kill it'. The attached PDF can be emailed/posted to staff in readiness for a pandemic to promote good hygiene practices amongst staff.

http://www.direct.gov.uk/en/Swineflu/DG_177831?IdcService=GET_FILE&dID=194088&Rendition=Web

In accordance with further guidance issued from the Health and Safety Executive's Office, employees need to be advised of the following:

- The symptoms and prevention of infection
- Self Certification periods may need to be extended from seven days to ten days at the peak of a pandemic due to shortage of GP's
- Employers should take a sympathetic approach to staff who are off sick or caring for dependents who are sick
- Employers should consider whether staff can be redeployed in the short term and to review their access to bank/temporary staff to cover for periods of absence in the short term
- Staff are likely to be anxious about the threat of infection at work and may stay away. Staff should be encouraged to come to work if they are not symptomatic
- Staff with childcare responsibilities may face childcare issues if schools/nurseries are closed for prolonged periods. Consideration may be given to child minding services/ paid and unpaid time off for those with childcare issues
- Threats of disciplinary action may be counter-productive in a pandemic. Most staff will want to work. Disciplinary action should be minimised so as not to penalise staff for circumstances beyond their control
- Honesty, discussion and communication with staff has proved to be the best form of maintaining morale during a sustained period of uncertainty
- Cross training on key functions may provide flexibility of cover for periods of short staffing
- Consideration should be given to staff who are under pressure and demonstrating signs of stress
- Adequate rest breaks should continue to be observed under the Working Time Directive

We will communicate with you as soon as any additional actions need to be taken.

WHO TO CONTACT FOR ASSISTANCE

1. A **Swine Flu Information line** has been set up by the Government to provide information on the swine flu virus. The telephone number is **0800 1 513 513**.
2. Department of Health – Modules

The Department of Health have prepared several downloadable documents from their website:

<http://www.dh.gov.uk/en/index.htm>

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Their Human Resources guidance suggest the following information should be updated as a priority and staff involved in contingency planning as staff may be required to work more flexibly, cover for each other and multi-skill in order to keep essential services going for the business:

- Staff contact details – address, phone numbers, next of kin
- Travel arrangements – can staff get in to work if transport links are affected/ can staff lift share? Use alternative means of travel?
- Do staff have dependents that need caring e.g. if schools are closed suddenly
- Do staff have other skills, can they work in other areas of the business if needs be?

3. A Poster is available for free from the NHS website to display at office and other work premises as a reminder of good hygiene for staff and visitors. The link below offers information on how to obtain a poster:

www.dh.gov.uk/en/Publicationsandstatistics/Publications/PublicationsPolicyAndGuidance/DH_063674

4. The Cabinet Office website has published a short but comprehensive business continuity checklist to help businesses plan for an epidemic at:

<http://www.cabinetoffice.gov.uk/media/132464/060516flubcpchecklist.pdf>

5. Business Link also has useful information readily available on their website:

<http://www.businesslink.gov.uk>

If you have any questions regarding the above please contact HR Initiatives on 01438 740256 or email us at:

info@hrinitiatives.co.uk