

Be prepared for the flu - Feature Article

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Jo Kitney, Director at an occupational health and safety organisation, explores the potential impact of a flu epidemic and advises on how to prepare for one.

History tells us that an influenza epidemic (affecting a community) or pandemic (affecting a country or the world) presents a real threat and challenge to the health and safety of workers and to the country, with a strong impact on individuals and organisations. While there are uncertainties with flu epidemics, it is known that planning and preparation can lessen the potential impact.

Flu and flu epidemics

In *UK Influenza Pandemic Preparedness Strategy 2011*, developed jointly across the four UK Governments, the Department of Health (DoH) considers pandemic influenza as one of the most severe natural challenges likely to affect the UK. As well as the potential to cause serious harm to human health, pandemic influenza threatens social and economic damage and disruption.

Influenza epidemics are natural phenomena and, unlike ordinary seasonal influenza that occurs every winter in the UK, pandemic flu can occur at any time of the year. With three recorded occurrences in the last century, it is highly likely that another influenza pandemic will occur in the future. Although it is impossible to forecast the exact timing or the precise nature of the impact, what is known is that the spread of infection is rapid and there are different health risks presented by different influenza strains.

Influenza virus

The influenza virus is easily passed from person to person when someone infected talks, coughs or sneezes, and can also be spread through hand/face contact after touching anything contaminated with the virus. Illness develops a few days (on average two to three) after being infected. Everyone is susceptible to the virus; however, only about 25% of the population would be expected to become ill and another 25% may catch the infection without experiencing symptoms. Symptoms are those of the ordinary flu, but may be more severe, and complications include bronchitis and pneumonia. Deaths can occur.

Workplace health and safety considerations

Pandemic flu is considered a public health matter. However, there are clear health and safety requirements for workers and the workplace. In the management of pandemic influenza at work, the influenza virus is recognised as a substance hazardous to health and the Control of Substances Hazardous to Health Regulations 2002 (COSHH) apply.

Considerations for managing the health and safety of laboratory workers fall into three broad areas:

- Workers who, as part of the wider community, may be exposed to the influenza virus during a pandemic and bring this exposure to the workplace.
- Diagnostic testing of samples during a time of pandemic.
- Work that involves the handling of influenza viruses for experimental and research purposes.

Containing the flu virus and preventing exposure and the spread of infection is critical in

managing risks. In terms of business continuity, contingency planning for a reduced labour force where workers cannot or should not come into the workplace will also matter, particularly for critical roles. Health and safety would also need to be considered for employees redeployed to unfamiliar tasks, lone or remote working as a result of reduced staffing resulting from sickness absence and changed work activities to reduce the spread of infection.

Information and requirements on controls for managing risks of pandemic flu and biosafety are available from recognised authorities and agencies such as the DoH and the Health and Safety Executive (HSE). This will need to be combined with hazard and risk management within the workplace to reflect the nature of the business and the activities of its workers and the type of exposure of workers and others.

As a matter of forward planning, businesses should undertake a risk assessment that identifies incidental and occupational exposure to the flu virus, potential sources of harm, who may be harmed and how (ie types of exposure). From this risk assessment, the hierarchy of control for managing hazards and risks can be applied, with containment and control options identified and business decisions made. The risk assessment should also include the likely phases of the pandemic, immune status, relevant vaccination history and the availability of vaccines and effective antiviral treatment.

For laboratories where risks of pandemic flu arise from the working population (as opposed to the laboratory work of its workers), the HSE general advice is to encourage each employee to adopt a common sense approach, with unwell employees staying at home. Within the workplace, good personal hygiene measures should be practised, including the use of disposable tissues to control coughs/sneezes, disposal of tissues after use and regular hand washing, particularly before eating and drinking. Masks are not generally considered necessary unless employees undertake close work with the public and, if so, the right type of mask would need to be provided.

For laboratories that knowingly handle or test virus samples, containment will be required to protect human and animal health. Required containment levels and whether or not masks are used will depend on the type of flu virus, and additional precautions such as vaccinations and anti-viral therapy will apply for employees. Work involving the genetic modification of the influenza virus is subject to the Genetically Modified Organisms (Contained Use) Regulations 2000.

Risk assessments and control measures used during non-pandemics will need to be reviewed in the event of pandemics, with an increase in or alternative control measures used as the level and type of risks change. Provision of masks, such as the filtering facepiece (FFP3), must be certified to the Personal Protective Equipment Directive and would fall under the Personal Protective Equipment at Work Regulations 2002.

Managing the workforce

As a measure to reduce the spread of infection, a general precaution during a pandemic is for employees to stay at or work from home. Remote electronic working and tele-conferencing meetings are sensible precautions, but may not be feasible for laboratory workers. The reduced pool of employees and changes to work practices and working hours will all need to be managed. Other legislation such as the Working Time Regulations 1998 may apply and alternative health and safety risks such as working from home may need to be considered.

For laboratory workers, pandemic flu may present an everyday risk because of the nature of the laboratory work or a future risk in the event of an actual pandemic. For both scenarios health and safety legislation applies, with risk management and deliberate controls needed to protect the health and safety of employees and others.

Further information

Pandemic Flu — Workplace Guidance (HSE, April 2008).

Advice on Experimental Working with Influenza Viruses of Pandemic Potential (HSE).

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