

# It's Not Flu As Usual

WHAT BUSINESSES NEED TO KNOW  
ABOUT H1N1 INFLUENZA



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## The Next Wave of the H1N1 Flu Virus

The 2009 H1N1 influenza outbreak demonstrated how rapidly a new strain of flu can emerge and spread around the world. As of September 2009, H1N1 was reported in all states and the District of Columbia, with more than 10,000 hospitalized cases and more than 600 deaths. While the initial onset of the H1N1 flu this spring in the United States briefly dominated news headlines, its impact was relatively moderate. However, federal officials warn that there could be a resurgent H1N1 flu outbreak during the upcoming fall and winter flu season, which could become more severe. In fact, some parts of the country are already experiencing a second wave of H1N1 outbreaks.

## Track and Arrest Absenteeism

Imagine that 10 percent of your employees are too sick to come to work on any given day. Imagine that over the course of several months to a year 15 percent or more of your workforce is absent for weeks. Imagine that the other businesses you rely on are facing the same massive absentee rates.

Each winter, the seasonal flu kills approximately 36,000 Americans, hospitalizes more than 200,000, and costs the United States economy more than \$10 billion in lost productivity and direct medical expenses. Bad as that is, health experts warn that if the H1N1 flu virus becomes more deadly, it would quickly overwhelm the U.S. public health and health care systems. It would also have a devastating effect on our nation's economy. With that much of the population and workforce affected, the H1N1 flu could disrupt your business.

In communities where H1N1 flu circulated this past spring, the infection rate was roughly six percent to eight percent over a three- to four-week period. During the winter season, infection rates could be two to three times higher, as both the H1N1 flu and the seasonal flu circulate and could sicken people simultaneously.

Influenza is difficult to predict, and so is determining future absenteeism scenarios. Still, employers need to know what their normal attendance rates are, so that if absenteeism rises above a certain threshold they can escalate tracking employee health and wellness and taking an array of steps to protect their business.

Absenteeism will likely be the central issue that businesses wrestle with during this pandemic —whether the outlook is similar to spring 2009, causing relatively minimal effects, or more widespread and severe, having more prolonged impacts. Businesses should focus on reducing the transmission of the H1N1 flu in the workplace, keeping employees healthy, and maintaining business continuity.



## Updated Federal Guidance for Businesses and Employers

Flexibility will be important. On August 19, the Department of Health and Human Services (HHS), the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC), and the Department of Homeland Security (DHS) released new guidance for non-healthcare employers for the upcoming flu season. Federal officials urge employers to plan to respond in a flexible way to varying levels of H1N1 flu severity and worker absenteeism.

Businesses and employers are encouraged to review the guidance as well as an accompanying toolkit, which includes questions and answers about the guidance, fact sheets for employers and employees, and sample e-mails and text messages for businesses to send to employees. The guidance and toolkit are available online at [www.flu.gov/plan/workplaceplanning/index.html](http://www.flu.gov/plan/workplaceplanning/index.html) and [www.flu.gov/plan/workplaceplanning/toolkit.html](http://www.flu.gov/plan/workplaceplanning/toolkit.html).

## H1N1 Flu Is Everyone's Problem

If the flu this fall and winter becomes more severe, it is likely to be a prolonged and widespread outbreak that could require major changes in many areas of society, including schools, businesses, transportation, and government. To be prepared, government health agencies encourage individuals, businesses, and communities to consider the following:

- Talk with your local public health officials and health care providers, who can supply information about the signs and symptoms of a specific disease outbreak and recommend prevention and control actions.
- Adopt business practices that encourage sick employees to stay home, and anticipate how to function with a significant portion of the workforce absent owing to illness or caring for ill family members.
- Practice good health habits, including eating a balanced diet, exercising daily, and getting sufficient rest.
- In addition, take commonsense steps to stop the spread of germs, including frequent hand washing, covering coughs and sneezes, and staying away from others as much as possible when you are sick.
- Stay informed about pandemic influenza and be prepared to respond. Businesses can receive e-mail updates on guidance and H1N1 facts and figures virtually daily through the federal government's clearinghouse for influenza information: [www.flu.gov](http://www.flu.gov).

## What to Do in the Event of a More Severe Outbreak

In a matter of weeks from April to June, the WHO raised its flu pandemic alert level to Phase 6 from Phase 3, where it had been for a number of years due to the threat of H5N1 (avian) flu. According to the WHO, the coordinating body for health within the United Nations, Phase 6 designates that a person-to-person transmission of the H1N1 flu virus is occurring globally. WHO officials essentially called on all governments to activate their pandemic response plans.

Similar to the initial outbreak this past spring, government health officials will issue information and warnings and work with the media to educate the public. Your company's managers, human resources department, and employees should pay close attention to the guidance provided by local and state health departments.

All businesses should be aware of community-based strategies that may delay or reduce the spread of a pandemic until a vaccine is available. CDC has issued instructions to reduce contact between people. Businesses, working with local government and health officials, and neighborhood groups, can take steps to limit the spread of pandemic flu. These steps can be viewed online at [www.flu.gov/plan/community/index.html](http://www.flu.gov/plan/community/index.html).

## Plan to Keep Your Business in Business

Business continuity means ensuring that essential business functions can survive a natural or man-made disruption as well as planning for cyber- or even terrorist-related biological, chemical, or nuclear attacks.

Many existing business continuity plans anticipate disruptions such as fires, earthquakes, and floods; these events are restricted to certain geographic areas, and the time frames are fairly well defined and limited. Pandemic flu, however, demands a different set of continuity assumptions since it will be widely dispersed geographically and will potentially arrive in waves that could last several months at a time.

With respect to the H1N1 virus, public health officials project that absentee rates could increase over several months. Absentees will include sick employees, those who must care for others who are sick, and the "worried well," who may want to avoid the workplace for fear of being exposed to the virus.

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## Steps Your Business Can Take to Decrease the Spread of the Flu and Maintain Business Continuity



Businesses must keep in mind that many strategies take time to implement.

- ✓ Update sick leave and family and medical leave policies and communicate with employees about staying away from the workplace if they are ill.
- ✓ Maintain a healthy work environment. Ensure adequate air circulation. Post tips on how to stop the spread of germs at work. Promote hand and respiratory hygiene. Ensure widespread and easy availability of alcohol-based hand sanitizer products.
- ✓ Establish an emergency communications plan and revise periodically. The plan should include key contacts (with backups), a chain of communications (including suppliers and customers), and the processes for communicating pandemic status and actions to employees, vendors, suppliers, and customers inside and outside the work site in a consistent and timely way. During the outbreak this past spring, internal websites proved effective for communicating to employees and providing links to trusted Internet resources.
- ✓ Identify your company's essential functions, including accounting, payroll, and information technology and the individuals who perform them. The absence of these individuals could seriously impair business continuity. Cross-train employees to perform essential functions.
- ✓ Plan for interruptions of essential governmental services like sanitation, water, power, and transportation or disruptions to the food supply. For example, your employees may need backup plans for car pools in case mass transit is interrupted.
- ✓ Determine which outside activities are critical to maintaining operations and develop alternatives. For example, what transportation systems are needed to provide essential materials? Does the business operate on just-in-time inventory or is there typically some reserve?
- ✓ Establish or expand policies and tools to promote "social distancing," such as reducing the number of face-to-face meetings and enabling employees to work from home with appropriate security and network access to applications.
- ✓ Check that existing business continuity contingency plans address long-term absenteeism rates. In particular, check to see if core business activities can be sustained over several weeks with only a minimal workforce available.
- ✓ Collaborate with insurers, health plans, and major health care facilities to share your pandemic contingency plans and to learn about their capabilities and plans.
- ✓ Education now and over the course of the pandemic can limit the effects of among your workforce. Tell your employees about the threat of a more severe wave of the H1N1 flu virus and about the steps the company is taking to prepare for it, and how basic policies they rely on would, or would not be, impacted.

A more comprehensive pandemic planning checklist developed by HHS for businesses can be found at [www.flu.gov](http://www.flu.gov).

## Employees' Health

Flu is caused by viruses that infect the nose, throat, and lungs and is generally spread from person to person when an infected person coughs or sneezes. A vaccination against the H1N1 flu – when it is available – will be the best way to prevent the disease.

To fight the annual flu, everyone should get a flu shot, especially health care workers. The following simple, commonsense precautions, recommended by CDC, should be communicated to your employees.

- **Avoid close contact with people who are sick.** If you are sick, keep your distance from others to protect them from getting sick, too.
- **Stay home when you're sick or have flu symptoms.** Get plenty of rest and check with a health care provider as needed.
- **Cover your mouth and nose with a tissue when coughing or sneezing.** If you don't have a tissue, cough or sneeze into your sleeve or elbow, not your hands. It may prevent those around you from getting sick.
- **Clean your hands after coughing or sneezing.** Washing your hands often will help protect you against germs. When soap and water are not available, use alcohol-based disposable hand wipes or gel sanitizers.
- **Avoid touching your eyes, nose, or mouth.** Germs are often spread when a person touches something that is contaminated and then touches his or her eyes, nose, or mouth.
- **Practice other good health habits.** Get plenty of sleep, be physically active, manage stress, drink plenty of fluids, eat nutritious foods, and avoid smoking, which may increase the risk of serious consequences if you do contract the flu.

## H1N1 Vaccination Campaign

The federal government is preparing for an H1N1 vaccination campaign. Health officials are striving to have a safe and effective vaccine available for distribution as early as mid-October 2009 – but it is possible, even probable, that severe outbreaks may begin in different parts of the United States before then. This makes prevention – keeping sick people away from healthy people and following personal hygiene recommendations – even more critical. In July, the Advisory Committee on Immunization Practices recommended who should receive priority for the first vaccinations:

- Pregnant women.
- People who live with or care for children younger than six months.
- Health care and emergency medical services (EMS) personnel.
- People between the ages of six months and 24 years of old.
- People from ages 25 through 64 years who are at higher risk for the new H1N1 flu because of chronic health disorders or compromised immune systems.

These groups total approximately 159 million people. The CDC does not expect that there will be a shortage of the H1N1 vaccine, but availability and demand can be unpredictable. Every state is expected to develop a vaccine delivery plan. Vaccines may become available in a combination of settings, such as vaccination clinics organized by local health departments, health care provider offices, schools, and other private settings, such as pharmacies and workplaces.

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## Key Differences Between Seasonal Flu And Pandemic Flu

SEASONAL (Annual) FLU	PANDEMIC FLU
Occurs every year during the winter months.	Occurs three to four times a century and can take place in any season and often comes in waves. On June 11, 2009, the World Health Organization (WHO) raised the worldwide pandemic alert level to Phase 6 in response to the ongoing global spread of the novel influenza H1N1 virus. A Phase 6 designation signifies that a global pandemic is under way.
Affects 5% to 20% of the U.S. population.	In places where the H1N1 flu circulated this past spring, the infection rate was 6% to 8%. Even with relatively low attack rates, the number of people absent from work this winter could be two to three times higher because members of the workforce are staying home to care for a sick person. Even relatively low levels of absences may slow down supply chain activities in some economic sectors, resulting in a negative impact on commerce.
Globally, kills 500,000 to 1 million people each year; 36,000 to 40,000 in the United States.	The worst pandemic of the last century--the Spanish Flu of 1918--killed 500,000 in the United States and 50 million worldwide.
Most people recover within a week or two.	H1N1 may be associated with a higher severity of illness and, consequently, a higher risk of death. At present, it is a relatively mild virus, but this can change quickly if the virus mutates into a more severe strain.
Deaths generally confined to at-risk groups, such as the elderly (over 65 years of age); the young (children aged six to 23 months); those with existing medical conditions like lung diseases, diabetes, cancer, kidney, or heart problems; and people with compromised immune systems.	No natural immunity exists against the new flu virus, so all age groups may be at risk for infection, not just at-risk groups. Otherwise fit adults could be at relatively greater risk based on patterns of previous epidemics. So far, the H1N1 flu appears to be infecting healthy young adults disproportionately, while sparing the elderly to a large extent.
Vaccination is effective because the virus strain in circulation each winter can be fairly reliably predicted.	Sufficient vaccine against pandemic flu may not be widely available until late fall.
Annual vaccination, when the correct virus strain is used, is fairly reliable, and antiviral drugs are available for those most at risk of becoming seriously ill.	Antiviral drugs may be in limited supply, but are generally effective against the new H1N1 flu strain