

Review

Safety, Health & Environment



Swine Flu: Surviving the Pandemic

HEALTH & SAFETY STEPS FOR BUSINESSES TO CONSIDER

Under the Health and Safety at Work etc Act 1974 (HSWA), an employer has a duty to ensure, so far as is reasonably practicable, the health, safety and welfare at work of his employees. The recent outbreak of swine flu, and subsequent declaration of a pandemic, will impact on all UK businesses and presents a challenge to employers in meeting their obligations under HSWA. It is clear that businesses should begin to consider contingency plans and disseminate information to their employees before the pandemic reaches its peak, which is anticipated in early September.

Each employer should assess the risk of swine flu to their organisation and take reasonable steps to manage the risks to their workforce. Various organisations, including the NHS and the Health and Safety Executive (HSE), have issued generic advice on the type of action that businesses should be taking to combat the outbreak, this is summarised below:

PLANNING

- Employers should plan for the outbreak in the same way they would do for all health and safety issues and should consider preparing a business continuity plan.
- Review all employees' next of kin and personal details on a regular basis so that they are fully up-to-date.
- The employer itself should make the ultimate decision as to whether to remain open, as the Government has stated that it will not forcibly close businesses.
- There should be plans for staffing issues, where worker numbers may be reduced by sickness absence. Employers should look at how the redeployment of workers to areas under strain, or the effect on those working alone, could impact on their health and safety obligations.

HYGIENE

- Employees should be encouraged to practice good hygiene measures, such as using disposable tissues to catch coughs and sneezes and regular hand washing.
- Businesses should consider installing anti-bacterial hand wash, or sanitiser gels, in preference to soap. Where practicable, these products should be made available at entrances to the premises, particularly where customers/clients or visitors use those entrances. Businesses could consider issuing personal sanitiser gel to all employees.
- Consider the use of physical barriers to restrict close interaction and direct contact with potentially ill customers/clients or visitors. However, at this stage, facemasks for employees are not considered necessary.
- Surfaces (for example, door handles) should be cleaned frequently with the usual cleaning products. The majority of cleaners should be asked to be on site prior to the arrival of staff (for example, between 5am and 7am).

COMMUNICATION

- Employees should be advised to stay at home, or be sent home, if they display the relevant symptoms. Work absences due to swine flu should be noted prominently in the organisation's absence book.
- Employees should be discouraged from returning to work until they are fully recovered and assessed as fit to do so by a doctor.
- Employers should consider allowing employees who are more susceptible to swine flu (pregnant employees, or those with underlying conditions) to be allowed to work remotely and consider enabling them to work more flexible hours to minimise travel in large crowds at rush hour.

Each employer should assess the risk of swine flu to their organisation.

- Employers may want to disseminate easily accessible information about the outbreak to their workforce, including details of the organisation's preparedness and contingency plan.
- Individuals should be contactable by mobile phone and/or email to advise of immediate office closure. Make sure that more than one method of communication is tried, in case the initial method fails.
- Assess the amount of face-to-face contact between employees, as well as with customers/clients or visitors. Consider alternatives to direct meetings (ie, phone and video conferencing).

RISK ASSESSMENTS

As with all health and safety matters, the impact of swine flu should be risk assessed within businesses to protect employees 'as far as is reasonably practicable'. Employers should identify potential hazards presented by the outbreak and groups of people who may be affected by those hazards. Any identified risks should be evaluated, and precautions against those risks should be proposed and implemented. Businesses should review their risk assessments regularly and update them if necessary.

CONCLUSION

Businesses should plan for the outbreak as they would for any health and safety issue, but should pay particular attention to staffing issues where workforce numbers are depleted. Good hygiene within each organisation will be vital in limiting the extent of the illness, as will good communication by the employer. Employees should be made aware of ways to prevent the spread of the virus and employers should make sure that sick employees practise self-isolation until they are fully recovered.

Please find below links and helplines for further information on Swine Flu and action to take:

Government information line is: 0800 1 513 513

National Flu Pandemic Service is: 0800 1 513 100
(<https://www.pandemicflu.direct.gov.uk/>) for help with diagnosing symptoms

Health and Safety Executive: (<http://www.hse.gov.uk/news/2009/swineflu.htm>)

Department of Health: (<http://www.dh.gov.uk/en/index.htm>)

Health Protection Agency (HPA): (<http://www.hpa.org.uk/>)

Direct Gov: (http://www.direct.gov.uk/en/Swineflu/DG_177831)

NHS-Swine flu introduction: (<http://www.nhs.uk/conditions/pandemic-flu/Pages/Introduction.aspx>)

NHS- Latest on Swine flu: (<http://www.nhs.uk/news/2009/04April/Pages/Swineflulatest.aspx>)

Business link: (http://www.businesslink.gov.uk/bdotg/action/detail?type=ONEOFFPAGE&itemId=1082470688&r.li=1082667871&atom_id=0.PR270942&r.lc=en&r.pp=11&r.pt=global&r.s=p)

FURTHER INFORMATION

If you require any further information please contact:

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