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H1N1 Influenza Flu Virus: Information for Employers

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Background

Over the last two weeks, an H1N1 influenza virus (commonly referred to as “swine flu”) has captured the attention of the global media, health authorities and the public and has had an immediate impact on social and economic life in Mexico City and other parts of Mexico.

It remains to be seen if the H1N1 influenza is a global health threat or an overblown story of global proportions. Either way, as can be seen from the impact on Mexico City and beyond, the economic impact for businesses can be very real, whatever the true health risks. Now is therefore a good time to reinforce best practices for managing health risks in the workplace and a good time to consider enhanced measures for reducing the risks of exposure and spread of contagious viruses.

H1N1 – The Facts on Symptoms and Transmission

The Public Health Agency of Canada characterizes the symptoms of H1N1 virus as comparable to human seasonal flu. Symptoms include headache, chills and cough followed by fever, loss of appetite, muscle

aches and fatigue, runny nose, sneezing, watery eyes and throat irritation. Nausea, vomiting and diarrhoea may also occur. In more severe cases, or in people with chronic conditions, complications such as pneumonia may develop.

The virus is contagious. It is believed that the virus spreads like seasonal influenza. Influenza, like other respiratory infections, is transmitted by air, when a person with the virus coughs or sneezes, and those germs are inhaled by another person. Likewise, the virus is spread by people touching infected surfaces such as doorknobs, railings and keyboards, and then touching their mouth and/or nose.

Workplace Protocol / Recommendations

Employers must be mindful that any measures taken in the workplace must be balanced against employee privacy rights, employment standards entitlements and human rights considerations.

Communication is important. Employees should be advised of appropriate measures to be taken to reduce the risk of illness; such

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communication should be measured and fact-based, designed to provide information but preferably not incite alarm.

Employers may wish to consider policies and communications designed to:

- Ensure employee contact information is current.
- Inform employees of steps the employer is taking to protect them in the workplace, including the purchase of hand sanitizer, changes to sanitation protocols, availability of protective equipment, etc.
- Encourage hand washing.
- Discourage physical contact, including shaking of hands.
- Encourage alternatives to business travel and face-to-face meetings whenever practical and encourage e-mail and teleconference use. In particular, consider limiting business travel to destinations under travel advisory.
- Update employees on travel alerts and inform employees of the employer's policy, if any, for those returning from a country where travel is not recommended.
- Ask employees to stay home from work if they are exhibiting any of the H1N1 flu symptoms and to call their respective provincial health information line to obtain additional information on diagnosis and/or treatment.
- Monitor the health of those who do attend work.
- Remind employees about sick leave policies.
- Ensure employees are aware of any process for remote electronic access to the company's information systems.

Employers should also be reviewing:

- Policies regarding paid time off. During the SARS crisis in 2003, many employers paid quarantined employees, who were not sick, while they remained away from the workplace. Other "at risk" employees were also paid while remaining away from work, though they were not ill. While employers may not wish to provide employees with an incentive to remain away from work, alternatively, employers face the dilemma of employees coming to work sick, if staying away from work will cost them a day's pay. The question of whether or not to pay absent employees who are not sick should be reviewed and a consistent approach should be adopted.
- The organization's capacity for implementing alternative work arrangements. Is it necessary for all employees to attend the workplace in order to work? Can steps be taken to reduce personal contact between employees, separating shifts, restricting movement between work groups etc? Should the employer implement remote "clean teams"? (Clean teams are staff sent off-site, and perhaps voluntarily quarantined so that they can return in the event of a mandatory quarantine of those in the workplace. Alternatively, clean teams simply work outside the usual workplace in an effort to stretch resources and reduce risk of a total quarantine.)
- Plans for dealing with employees who refuse to attend work, due to real or perceived risks.

- Communications strategies with employees, customers, suppliers, the media and others in the event the company faces quarantine or other challenge arising from H1N1 or any other health issue.
- Security considerations, in the event employees and regular security personnel are restricted from attending the workplace.

It is no doubt too early for most Canadian employers to be adopting all of the possible containment and communication measures outlined above. Now, however, is the time for business leaders to reinforce good hygiene practices and consider a timetable for implementation of more aggressive measures if necessary.

Stay Informed

At present, the most important role for human resources personnel and other leaders in a workplace is to stay well informed and positioned to provide fact-based commentary, particularly when confronted with rumour and exaggeration. The following websites are good sources of updated information:

The Public Health Agency of Canada:
H1N1 Human Swine Influenza:

www.phac-aspc.gc.ca/alert-alerte/swine_200904-eng.php

Government of Canada: Travel Warning to Mexico:

www.phac-aspc.gc.ca/tmp-pmv/2009/hsf-mexico-090430-eng.php

Government of Canada: Travel Outside of North America:

www.phac-aspc.gc.ca/tmp-pmv/2009/hsf-outside_na-090430-eng.php

Additional Provincial Resources

Alberta

www.health.alberta.ca/health-info/swine-flu.html

British Columbia

www.healthlinkbc.ca/healthfiles/hfile108.stm

Ontario

www.health.gov.on.ca/english/public/updates/archives/hu_09/swine_flu.html

For general information on the swine flu, individuals may call the ServiceOntario INFOline at 1-800-476-9708. If an individual is exhibiting signs of the H1N1 virus, he or she may call TeleHealth Ontario at 1-866-797-0000.

Quebec

If an individual is exhibiting signs of the H1N1 virus, he or she should call Info-Sant  at 811 for further information on diagnosis and treatment.

See also:

<http://www.pandemiequebec.gouv.qc.ca/fr/actualites/actualites.shtml> [French]

<http://www.pandemiequebec.gouv.qc.ca/en/news/news.shtml> [English]

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