

Attention Businesses! This sample employee newsletter article has been prepared for you to customize and reprint for your company newsletter. Simply copy the text from the newsletter posted on www.healthservices.gov.bc.ca/pho/pandemic.html and paste into a Word document.

May 11, 2006

Word Count: 1,113

Pandemic Influenza and You

Influenza spreads worldwide every year and infects about 500 million people, with less than one percent mortality occurring from the illness or its complications. Illness from annual influenza is caused by slight changes in the influenza viruses that are in constant circulation around the world.

An influenza pandemic may occur when a new virulent influenza virus emerges that can easily infect humans, and against which people have little or no immunity. It would have far more serious health effects than the typical influenza seen each season since people would have little or no natural resistance to the new virus.

If an influenza pandemic occurs, it may hit individual communities at different times. It could affect a community for a period of several weeks, subside and then reappear again several months later. There could be a few waves of pandemic influenza in B.C. before the pandemic is finished.

Influenza pandemics have happened every 10 to 40 years for at least the last 400 years. There were three flu pandemics last century, the most recent in 1968. The most severe – often called the “Spanish Flu” pandemic – was in 1918. No one can predict exactly when a pandemic will happen, but people, communities and businesses are encouraged to prepare now so they are ready to respond.

The avian influenza connection

Avian influenza viruses naturally occur in wild migratory birds, and they can carry it to domestic flocks of chickens and ducks. Recently, a severe sub-type of an H5N1 avian influenza virus, that is lethal to some birds, has been found in domestic chickens and ducks in Asia, Europe and Africa, leading to government mandated destruction of these birds as a measure to manage this disease.

Experts believe that the most likely potential cause of a pandemic at this time could be this H5N1 avian virus, which shows a very limited ability to spread from birds to humans, if humans are in close and prolonged contact.

Scientists have been closely tracking the rapid spread of the H5N1 avian influenza virus from Asia to Europe to Africa and watching for mutations, to identify any new strain that might cause a pandemic.

Protect yourself from influenza

Every year, influenza viruses cause outbreaks in late fall and winter. This is because each year, influenza viruses change a little so the protection, or immunity, our bodies have built up against previous viruses is not as effective.

Influenza is a significant respiratory disease in humans, and for this reason you are encouraged to get your influenza vaccine every year to help protect yourself and others.

Getting your influenza vaccine also helps manufacturers build and maintain their production capacity so they can better respond to vaccine demand.

In addition to a vaccine, there are simple health protection measures that you can use to protect yourself and others from influenza (annual or pandemic). These include:

- Washing your hands often or using a gel or alcohol-based hand sanitizer
- Covering your mouth and nose with tissue when coughing and sneezing, and immediately throwing the tissue away.
- Avoiding touching your eyes, nose and mouth.
- Staying home when you are sick with influenza symptoms, which can include fever, headache, aches and pains, extreme fatigue, sneezing, coughing, sore throat, chest congestion.

Treatment during a pandemic

Antiviral and antibiotic drugs could be used during a pandemic, mainly during the first wave to treat early illness related to the disease; however supplies will be limited. Both Canada and B.C. have purchased an advance supply of these drugs, and have committed to purchasing more. Discussions are taking place on the national level about how best to use the supplies of these drugs.

Canada has contracted with a domestic supplier to develop a vaccine for a pandemic virus once it emerges. A vaccine for a pandemic influenza virus cannot be prepared before a pandemic is declared because it is still unknown which exact virus might spark an outbreak. The influenza vaccine must contain antigens from the specific influenza virus that causes the pandemic, in order to help the body build immunity to that particular strain of influenza.

Impacts on the Workplace

Since every pandemic is different, the impact on business cannot be fully established until more is known about how it is evolving.

It can be anticipated there will be people absent from work, either because they are ill or are taking care of others. People may also decide to stay away from mass gatherings or public places based on advice from public health experts. Experts predict that depending on the severity of the pandemic, up to one-third of Canada's working population may have to take days off work at some stage during the pandemic.

Businesses are encouraged to develop contingency plans now to help mitigate the impacts to their organizations and their employees. Guidelines to help businesses prepare have been developed by the B.C. government and can be found at www.health.gov.bc.ca/pandemic/index.html

Protect Yourself, Your Family, and Co-workers

The Ministry of Health and the BC Centre for Disease Control recommend the following steps be taken to help prepare for and protect against pandemic influenza.

- ✓ **Stay informed and get the facts.** The following web sites provide regularly updated information about avian and pandemic influenza:
 - Ministry of Health: www.health.gov.bc.ca/pandemic/index.html
 - BC Center for Disease Control (BCCDC): www.bccdc.org
 - World Health Organization: www.who.int

- ✓ **Stop germs from spreading. Flu is spread from hands to mouth.**
 - Wash your hands often or use a gel or alcohol-based hand cleaner
 - Cover your mouth and nose with tissue when coughing and sneezing, and immediately throw the tissue away. Wash your hands.
 - Avoid touching your eyes, nose and mouth
 - Stay home when you are sick with influenza symptoms.

- ✓ **Use the BC HealthGuide, BC Nurseline and the BC HealthFiles listed below as resources:**
 - *What is a Pandemic?* - www.bchealthguide.org/healthfiles/hfile94a.stm
 - *Staying Healthy During a Pandemic* - www.bchealthguide.org/healthfiles/hfile94b.stm
 - *Self-Care During a Pandemic* - www.bchealthguide.org/healthfiles/hfile94c.stm
 - *BC HealthGuide* - www.bchealthguide.org/kbaltindex.asp
 - *BC NurseLine* -
 - Toll-free in BC 1-866-215-4700
 - In Greater Vancouver 604-215-4700
 - Deaf and hearing-impaired 1-866-889-4700
 - Website www.bchealthguide.org/nurseline.stm

- ✓ **If you plan to travel, check the travel advisories** on the Public Health Agency of Canada website at www.phac-aspc.gc.ca/tmp-pmv/pub_e.html

- ✓ **Keep an emergency supply kit on hand** with over the counter medications for influenza symptoms - acetaminophen, ibuprofen/aspirin, antacid and cough/cold medication (note: aspirin should not be given to children 20 years or younger because of the risk of Reye's Syndrome, which can cause brain and liver damage). Ask your pharmacist for advice about what kinds of over-the-counter medicine you should buy, and when to use them. Let the pharmacist know if you have any chronic medical problems.