

It's Not Flu as Usual:

An H1N1 Business Preparedness Guide



S P O N S O R E D B Y





THE U.S. CHAMBER OF COMMERCE IS THE WORLD'S LARGEST BUSINESS FEDERATION REPRESENTING MORE THAN 3 MILLION BUSINESSES AND ORGANIZATIONS OF EVERY SIZE, SECTOR, AND REGION.

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The Next Wave of the H1N1 Flu Virus

The 2009 H1N1 influenza outbreak has demonstrated how rapidly a new strain of flu can emerge and spread around the world. As of late August in the United States, H1N1 was reported in all 50 states and two territories, including 8,843 hospitalized cases and 556 deaths.¹ While the initial wave of the H1N1 flu this spring in the United States briefly dominated news headlines, its impact was relatively moderate. But the nation—the business community, in particular—cannot let down its guard. Federal officials warn that a second wave this coming flu season could be much more widespread and severe.

Absenteeism

Imagine that 10% 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% or more² of your workforce is absent for weeks. Imagine that the other businesses you rely on are also facing the same massive absentee rates.

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

In communities where H1N1 flu circulated this past spring, the infection rate was roughly 6% to 8% 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 sicken people simultaneously.³

Influenza is difficult to predict, and so is future absenteeism. Still, business owners and managers should be familiar with attendance rates so that if absenteeism rises above ordinary levels they can then take actions to protect employee health and maintain business operations.

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1. Official data are available at www.cdc.gov/h1n1flu/update.htm#totalcases. At the time of this writing, some estimates suggest as many as 1 million probable cases. Global data can be found at www.who.int/csr/don/2009_08_04/en/index.html.
 2. In August, a World Health Organization official said that 15% to 45% of a country's population could become infected by the new H1N1 virus by the end of the pandemic. The President's Council of Advisors on Science and Technology reported similar findings on August 27 and are available at www.ostp.gov/cs/pcast.
 3. See July 24 Centers for Disease Control and Prevention press briefing transcript at www.cdc.gov/media/transcripts/2009/t090724.htm.

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

Updated Federal Guidance and Toolkit

Businesses should also focus on flexibility. 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-health care employers for the upcoming flu season. Federal officials urge employers to respond in a flexible way to varying levels of H1N1 flu severity and worker absenteeism.

Businesses and employers are encouraged to review this federal guidance and a toolkit, which include fact sheets for employers and employees and sample e-mails and text messages for businesses to send to employees. These resources are available online at www.flu.gov/plan/workplaceplanning/index.html and www.flu.gov/plan/workplaceplanning/toolkit.html.

H1N1 Flu—Everyone's Problem

If the flu becomes more severe this fall and winter, 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 encouraging 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.
- Take 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.

At the end of the day, both the public and private sectors must incorporate the lessons we learned this spring. Being prepared to respond to an emergency is in a business' own interest; it is also a shared responsibility of both business and government to become actively engaged in preparation and prevention efforts—working separately and together.

Key Differences Between Seasonal Flu and Pandemic Flu	
Seasonal 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%. During the winter, the attack rates could be two to three times as high because members of the workforce are sick or they 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, including 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 (65 years and older); the young (children ages 6 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 reliably predicted.	Sufficient vaccine against pandemic flu will not be immediately available if a new outbreak begins early this coming fall. New strains of viruses must be accurately identified, and producing an effective vaccine could take approximately six months.
Antiviral drugs are available for those most at risk of becoming seriously ill.	Antiviral drugs may be in short supply. Thus far, they are generally effective against the new H1N1 flu strain.

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 person-to-person transmission of the H1N1 flu virus is occurring globally. WHO officials have called on all governments to activate their pandemic response plans.

As they did during the initial outbreak this past spring, government health officials will issue information and warnings while working with the media and organizations like the U.S. Chamber of Commerce to disseminate advice on how to avoid becoming ill. Your company's managers, human resources department, and employees should pay close attention to the guidance provided by federal, state, and local health departments.

In a worst-case scenario, business as usual may cease. Health officials may recommend restricting travel, canceling public events, and closing schools.

The U.S. Chamber of Commerce recommends that businesses review continuity plans and anticipate nuts-and-bolts issues, such as high employee absentee rates.

Keep Your Business in Business

Business continuity means ensuring that essential business functions can survive natural or man-made disruptions 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.

All Hazards Preparedness

Running a small business leaves little time for planning for a disaster. But nearly any threat or hazard—such as an earthquake, wildfire, or flood—could force a business to close its doors permanently. According to the Institute for Business & Home Safety, 25% of businesses that close following a major disaster do not reopen. It is not clear how many small businesses may close in the wake of a severe pandemic, but they could be especially vulnerable to a virulent H1N1 outbreak and should make preparedness a priority.

Small businesses are the backbone of private sector industries and their local communities. Even if faced with widespread absenteeism, restricted services, and supply chain disruptions, well-prepared businesses can keep their doors open and our nation's economy strong and resilient.

Small business owners should select someone to be responsible for infectious disease issues at the workplace. Also, small business owners should update employee telephone rosters, buy emergency supplies (federal officials recommend storing a two-week supply of food and medical resources for work and home), and review emergency plans with employees.

Responsibilities of Critical Infrastructures and Governments

Eighty-five percent of critical infrastructures reside in the private sector. Critical infrastructures are businesses that have assets and systems—whether physical or virtual—so vital to the United States that their incapacitation or permanent harm would have a potentially devastating impact on the economic and national security of our country. Critical infrastructures and government health and homeland security departments across the country have a unique and shared responsibility to ensure the health, safety, and ongoing operations of our critical infrastructures.

DHS published a guide to assist critical infrastructure owners and operators with planning, preparing, and responding to a pandemic influenza. It is available at www.flu.gov/plan/pdf/cikrpandemicinfluenzaguide.pdf.

The guide advocates for involvement and support from all levels of business—from CEOs to frontline workers and their families. It encourages business contingency planners to identify essential functions, people, and materials that are necessary to keep a business functioning during a pandemic. Critical infrastructures with more than one facility should authorize local managers to take appropriate actions based on the business' pandemic plan and the situation in each community.

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

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

1

Update sick leave and family and medical leave policies and communicate with employees about staying away from the workplace if they are ill. For example, employers may want to temporarily forgo requiring sick notes from employees' doctors to relieve some of the strain on the nation's health care system.

2

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, including wipes and gels.

3

Establish an emergency communications plan and revise periodically. The plan should include key contacts (with backups) as well as 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 web sites proved effective for communicating to employees and providing links to trusted Internet resources.

4

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.

5

Plan for interruptions of essential government 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.



6

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?

7

Establish or expand policies and tools to promote “social distancing,” such as reducing the number of face-to-face meetings and allowing employees to work from home (telecommuting) with appropriate security and network access to applications.

8

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.

9

Collaborate with insurers, health plans, and major health care facilities to share your pandemic contingency plans and learn about their capabilities and plans.

10

Educate employees now and over the course of a pandemic to limit the negative effects of H1N1 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.

For a more comprehensive pandemic checklist developed by HHS for businesses, visit 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 the 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.
- 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.

Antivirals: Tamiflu® and Relenza®

While the influenza vaccine is one of the most effective ways to protect people from becoming sick during a pandemic, an H1N1 vaccine may not be immediately available in significant quantities should a new wave hit the United States.

As part of a business' multilayered defense, which includes hand washing and cough etiquette, the CDC recommends the use of oseltamivir (Tamiflu®) or zanamivir (Relenza®) for prompt treatment of people who may be at risk for complications of H1N1 flu infection, such as pregnant women and individuals with diabetes. These medications must be prescribed by a health care professional.

When people get sick, antiviral drugs can make their illnesses milder and make them feel better faster. Antiviral drugs work best when started soon after the onset of symptoms—within 48 hours—particularly for hospitalized patients or people at high risk for influenza-related complications.⁴

Both Tamiflu® and Relenza® may be available from your local pharmacy or hospital and were part of the recently released Strategic National Stockpile to state and local health departments. Makers of Tamiflu® and Relenza®—Roche and GlaxoSmithKline, respectively—have flexible purchase programs that will allow businesses to stockpile antivirals for use in a pandemic.

Vaccines

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 6 months.
- Health care and emergency medical services (EMS) personnel.
- People between the ages of 6 months and 24 years old.
- People from ages 25 to 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 be given in a variety of settings, including vaccination clinics organized by local health departments, health care provider offices, schools, and other private settings, such as pharmacies and workplaces.

4. At the time of this writing, federal officials are revising guidance about how Tamiflu® and Relenza® can be used to prevent the flu (prophylaxis) when they are given to a person who is not ill, but who has been or may be near someone with H1N1 flu. Guidance on the use of antivirals is available at www.cdc.gov/h1n1flu.

Masks and Respirators

The CDC generally recommends that respiratory protection—masks and respirators—be used in health care settings, like a hospital or clinic, because health care employees are at increased risk of becoming infected when caring for a patient with H1N1 flu.

The CDC says that face masks or N95 respirators are generally not recommended for workers in non-health care occupational settings or for ordinary work activities. For specific work activities that involve contact with people who have H1N1 or seasonal flu, the following practices are recommended:

- Workers should try to maintain a distance of 6 feet or more from people who are ill.
- Workers should keep their interactions with sick people as brief as possible.
- Sick people should be asked to follow good cough and hand hygiene practices and to wear a face mask if able and one is available.
- Workers at increased risk of severe illness from influenza should avoid people with H1N1 or seasonal flu (possibly through temporary reassignment).
- Where workers cannot avoid close contact with people who are ill, some workers may choose to wear a face mask or N95 respirator on a voluntary basis.

Face masks are loose fitting, disposable masks that cover the nose and mouth and are meant to keep splashes or sprays from reaching the mouth and nose of the person wearing one. They are not designed to protect against breathing in very small particles, gases, or vapors, which is the role of a tightly fitting N95 respirator. Face masks should be used once and then thrown in the trash. The government does not test face masks, but it does test and certify N95 respirators. Additional information on antivirals, vaccines, face masks, and respirators can be found at www.flu.gov and www.cdc.gov/h1n1flu.

Community Mitigation

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



Revised Policy on School Closures

In early August, the federal government issued new guidelines to the nation's 130,000 public and private K-12 schools, which have 55 million students and 7 million staff, on how to handle a resurgence of H1N1 flu cases. During the spring, federal authorities urged schools to close at the first signs of a sick student. However, officials backed away from such a strong stance once they had a better understanding of how the current H1N1 flu virus behaves and how to control it.

Authorities said that students and staff who appear sick should be separated from others until they can be sent home. Sick individuals should stay home for 24 hours after they are symptom free.

Officials also stressed that the decision to dismiss students should be made locally. State and local officials are already planning for temporary home schooling and are considering additional steps if the flu dramatically worsens. Guidance on school planning can be found at www.flu.gov/plan/school/index.html.

H1N1 Preparedness: Job #1

The U.S. Chamber of Commerce and our sponsors are encouraging preparedness for a severe H1N1 pandemic within the business community.

In addition to the threat that a widespread and deadly pandemic could pose to human health worldwide, few industries will be insulated from the economic effects resulting from absenteeism in the workplace or from the downstream effects stemming from supply chain and travel disruptions.

It is important for business owners and leaders to be knowledgeable about the risks associated with an H1N1 flu pandemic and, in turn, to be adequately prepared for the possibility that a severe pandemic could have significant social and economic costs.

In summary, this guidance is intended to provide recommendations on how businesses can:

- Prepare for the next wave of H1N1 flu, which may be more severe, in order to maintain business continuity.
- Protect employees' health.
- Cut through the maze of public information to focus on essential action steps.

By planning and preparing now, businesses can likely mitigate hardships in the future. The U.S. Chamber encourages its members to stay informed, be prepared, and help create a resilient economy.

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This guide was prepared by the U.S. Chamber's National Security and Emergency Preparedness Department.

Internet Resources to Assist Businesses and Educate Employees

www.uschamber.com/pandemic

U.S. Chamber pandemic preparedness information

<http://healthyamericans.org/pandemic-flu>

Trust for America's Health pandemic flu initiative

www.flu.gov

One-stop shop for U.S. government information on H1N1 and seasonal flu; receive e-mail updates

www.flu.gov/plan/workplaceplanning/guidance.html

Updated federal guidance for businesses for the fall flu season

www.flu.gov/plan/workplaceplanning/toolkit.html

A communication toolkit for business

www.cdc.gov/h1n1flu/business

CDC H1N1 flu resources for businesses and employers

www.pandemicflu.gov/plan/pdf/businesschecklist.pdf

HHS/CDC business planning checklist

www.flu.gov/vaccine/antiviral_employers.html

Considerations for antiviral stockpiling by employers

www.pandemictoolkit.com

Roche-Tamiflu®

www.pandemicplan.gsk.com

GSK-Relenza®

www.disastersafety.org

Institute for Business & Home Safety

www.google.org/flutrends

Google Flu Trends

www.3M.com/H1N1

3M resources specific to respirator use for exposures to the H1N1 virus

www.osha.gov/dsg/topics/pandemicflu/index.html

Occupational Safety and Health Administration (OSHA) employee safety and health guidance for a pandemic

www.cdc.gov/niosh/topics/h1n1flu

CDC/National Institute for Occupational Safety and Health issues and H1N1 flu

www.hhs.gov/web/library/hhsfluwidgets.html

HHS flu widgets

www.cdc.gov/SocialMedia/Campaigns/H1N1

CDC social media

www.ready.gov/business DHS/FEMA

Business emergency plan resources

www.who.int

World Health Organization

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