

ADVISER

INFLUENZA PREPAREDNESS

As recent strains of influenza have hit the UK over the past few months, organisations need to take steps to minimise the impact that it could have on their people and operations.

A RECENT PRESS RELEASE ISSUED BY THE WORLD HEALTH ORGANIZATION REPORTED THAT UP TO 650,000 DEATHS ANNUALLY ARE ASSOCIATED WITH RESPIRATORY DISEASES FROM SEASONAL INFLUENZA.¹

“These figures indicate the high burden of influenza and its substantial social and economic cost to the world,” said Dr Peter Salama, Executive Director of WHO’s Health Emergencies Programme. “They highlight the importance of influenza prevention for seasonal epidemics, as well as preparedness for pandemics.”

OVERVIEW

In the UK, hospital admissions and GP visits for influenza saw a sharp increase in December 2017 and January 2018. Influenza epidemics occur on an annual basis, predominantly in the winter and spring months. Every year there are several flu strains circulating, largely classified as Human Influenza A viruses, such as H3N2 and H1N1, which are ever evolving and therefore less responsive to vaccination programmes, and Influenza B viruses, which are less volatile and more likely to affect children or the elderly whose immune systems are less robust.

One of the strains that is circulating this year – a version of H3N2 – has been dubbed “Aussie flu” because of the significant impact it had on the Australian population during the 2017 flu season. For the majority of people, vaccination is the best means of defence; most people experiencing flulike symptoms will recover within one to two weeks without any specialist treatment with plenty of bed rest, lots of fluid intake, and high street medications such as paracetamol or ibuprofen. However for some people, such as the very old, very young, or those with pre-existing health conditions such as heart disease, symptoms can be very severe.

For businesses and public bodies, the main concern is the highly contagious nature of the influenza virus. This can result in increased numbers of absenteeism, particularly where teams work in close proximity to each other. Practical health precautions such as good hand hygiene practices, enhanced workplace cleaning and disinfecting regimes, and encouraging individuals who display symptoms of illness not to come to work can help reduce the spread of infection.

SHOULD ORGANISATIONS BE CONCERNED?

Organisations should take the time to review their risk management, business continuity, and other response and crisis management plans to help address the risks presented by these current virus outbreaks and similar occurrences. This is particularly true for any organisation that conducts business in and around potentially affected areas.

There are several effects that a pandemic can have on an organisation’s business activities and its people. As with past pandemic threats, Marsh Risk Consulting (MRC) recommends that organisations may want to consider the following in their risk assessments and planning:

- The travel and tourism industries could be adversely affected by falling passenger numbers if business travellers and tourists choose to stay at home or change their travel plans.
- Supply chains and operations could be affected if the viruses spread further and more rapidly to areas where employees, key suppliers, or customers are located; there are denser populations; and/or there is restricted access to health care.

¹ World Health Organization. “Up to 650 000 people die of respiratory diseases linked to seasonal flu each year,” available at <http://www.who.int/mediacentre/news/releases/2017/seasonal-flu/en/>, accessed 16 February 2018.

- Food distribution, retail, and service industries could be affected by patrons altering their habits due to fears over food safety and increased infection potential in public spaces.

BUSINESS CONTINUITY AND CRISIS MANAGEMENT IMPLICATIONS

While many firms have procedures and plans in place for emergencies that impact business continuity and/or crisis management, they may not adequately cover a situation involving communicable diseases that affect employees and the general population on a wider scale. Even companies that have prepared pandemic plans over the past few years may not have had the opportunity to update or fully test plans.

Now is the time for an organisation's management to review its risk management controls, human resource and other pandemic policies, and crisis management and business continuity plans. Organisations should make sure these plans are updated and well understood by management and employees. Additionally, there are preventative and preparatory actions that should be taken.

The key steps for organisations to take when preparing for a pandemic include:

- Reviewing company travel policies, hygiene and medical screening policies, and policies on anti-virals and health support, including the provision of alcohol-based anti-bacterial sanitiser, masks, and other materials.
- Identifying opportunities to apply social-distancing and other means to minimise exposure and the spread of illness within the workplace. In heavily populated centres, make sure plans allow for staff to work from home where appropriate and technologically feasible.
- Reviewing methods for providing ongoing information about both the pandemic threat and the status of business operations to employees at work and at home.
- Addressing the continuity requirements of any vital processes that must be maintained for the normal operation of the organisation or a central location that may be vulnerable in a pandemic, that is, call centres, health services, and services vital to the elderly or infirm.
- Reviewing the corporate structure necessary to manage the impacts and consequences of a pandemic event on an organisation, including effectively implementing multiple business continuity and response plans, coping with any major increase in the number of employees working from home or unable to work at all, and addressing business strategy and operational impacts due to substantial changes to the marketplace and supply chain.
- Confirming that crisis management and business continuity plans include detailed pandemic protocols and that needed technology, infrastructure, and other requirements are addressed in advance.

The principle goals for business continuity, crisis management planning, and response should be to reduce exposure and proactively minimise impacts such as high absenteeism and disruptions of operations and/or supply chains. Organisations should continue to monitor developments via the websites of the [WHO](#) and the [NHS](#), as well as those of local health authorities.

CURRENT ADVISORY

It is highly encouraged that businesses have increased focus on common sense measures to keep employees safe, particularly those located in or travelling to potentially affected areas. These precautions include:

- Washing hands frequently (with soap and warm water) and use alcohol-based hand sanitisers.
- Covering your nose and mouth with a tissue or your sleeve when coughing or sneezing.
- Keeping your distance from individuals who appear to be sick.
- Avoiding touching your face (viruses can enter the system through the nose, mouth, and eyes).
- Seeking medical attention if symptoms such as coughing, sneezing, fever, and/or difficulty breathing occurs within 10 days of travelling to an affected area. Alert your medical provider of your recent travel.
- Remaining at home if you are showing flu-like symptoms to prevent the potential spread of the virus.

For pandemic risk preparedness and response solutions, please contact our team at Marsh Risk Consulting at mrc-uk@marsh.com



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