



Australian Government

Comcare

*OHS preparedness for an
Influenza Pandemic:
A guide for employers*

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1. Introduction

1.1 Purpose

This guidance provides information to employers on managing the occupational health and safety (OHS) risks associated with an influenza pandemic. It outlines a framework using risk management principles and gives general advice on workplace health and safety issues. It is recommended that OHS risk control measures are incorporated into the organisation's business continuity plan for pandemic influenza.

This guidance is not intended to be public health information. Neither is it intended to cover all risks or to describe all possible control measures that may be applicable. It is designed to provide basic information to help employers and employees fulfil their duties under the *Occupational Health and Safety (Commonwealth Employment) Act 1991* (OHS(CE) Act).

This guidance applies to all employers and employees covered by the OHS(CE) Act.

1.2 Other relevant material and guidance

This guidance material has been developed within the context of other key documents relating to an influenza pandemic in Australia, including:

- *Australian Health Management Plan for Pandemic Influenza 2006* by Australian Department of Health and Ageing;
- *National Action Plan for Human Influenza Pandemic* by Department of the Prime Minister and Cabinet; and
- *Business Continuity Guide for Australian Business* by Department of Industry Tourism and Resources.

Further sources of information and links are listed at the end of this guide.

Note that Comcare should not be relied on as a primary source for health specific information. Employers are advised to regularly consult the Australian Department of Health and Ageing as the key agency for pandemic and health related information.

1.3 Updates to this guidance

This guidance will be updated as further information on pandemic influenza becomes available. Employers are advised to check the Comcare website to ensure they have the latest version.



2. What is Pandemic Influenza and what are its effects?

2.1 Current concerns

An influenza pandemic is a global epidemic that occurs when a new influenza virus subtype emerges, spreads easily between humans and is capable of causing severe disease.

Avian influenza is a virus that is infectious among birds and causes illness in birds. On very rare occasions it can infect humans who are in close contact with infected birds.

One particularly virulent strain of avian influenza, H5N1, has emerged in bird flocks in a number of countries around the world. It is classified as highly pathogenic based on the high death rate among infected birds and among the few humans who have been infected from birds. However, there is no evidence that the H5N1 virus can spread efficiently from human to human, and there is no immediate threat to the health of Australians.

Fears of a global human pandemic are based on the risk that the H5N1 bird virus could mutate to become easily transmitted between humans. A mutated avian influenza virus could rapidly become a world wide pandemic since human populations have no previous exposure to this virus strain and therefore have little immunity.

2.2 Symptoms of Avian Influenza

Early symptoms of the avian influenza in humans will be the same as for other influenza, including:

- fever;
- sore throat;
- cough;
- headache; and
- muscle aches and pains.

However, the illness may advance rapidly and lead to bacterial infections, pneumonia and other severe and life threatening complications.

2.3 Community impact of a pandemic

A pandemic goes through a series of six phases as described by the World Health Organisation which are grouped into three periods: inter-pandemic, pandemic alert and pandemic. A pandemic is also likely to occur in two or three repeat waves (or cycles), each taking around 8-12 weeks. Although there is international and national surveillance of the disease it is not possible to predict the timing of an influenza



pandemic. Advice is available from Department of Health and Ageing on what phases are current for both Australia and overseas.

In the event of a pandemic reaching Australia we should expect large scale community, social and business disruption from illness and from the imposition of public health and other emergency measures. For some periods only essential services may be available, as schools and public venues close and restrictions are placed on public transport and non-essential services. Non-essential workplaces may also be closed and staff stood down.

It is anticipated that up to 25% of the population could become infected and ill during the course of a pandemic. Some people will die and it is estimated that with an infection rate of 25% there could be between 13,000 to 44,000 deaths in Australia.

2.4 Workplace impact of a pandemic

It is anticipated that at the height of a pandemic some 40%-50% of the workforce could be absent; either ill, caring for sick family or unwilling to attend work. This represents a significant threat to core business and will demand changes to the type of work done, work practices and to staffing arrangements to maintain business continuity.

Factors affecting attendance may include:

- very high absenteeism due to illness, caring for family;
- absence based on fear and anxiety;
- stringent infection control measures in both the community and the workplace;
- restricted transport; and
- the impact of possible deaths and serious illness among families, friends and work colleagues.

It is not possible to predict the timing of the onset of a pandemic so it is imperative that employers prepare beforehand by developing pandemic influenza business continuity plans.

3. Employer and employee obligations for health and safety

3.1 Employer's Duty of Care

Under the OHS(CE) Act employers are required to take all reasonably practicable steps to protect the health and safety at work of their employees. An influenza pandemic is reasonably foreseeable¹, and as such, employers have a duty of care to

¹ The Department of Health and Ageing website advises that "A pandemic is very much on the cards in the foreseeable future."



undertake planning and preparation for potential workplace exposure to avian influenza.

Measures to ensure the health and safety of employees at work should be incorporated into an organisation's business continuity planning for pandemic influenza.

Consultation

Under the Act, employers must consult with their employees when assessing a risk to the health and safety of employees at any workplace under the employer's control. Consultation is also required in the selection and application of control measures. In assessing the risks posed by pandemic influenza, employers should consult widely using existing workplace arrangements. The involvement of health and safety representatives (HSRs) and the health and safety committee is central to a consultative approach to risk management.

Duties of employees

Employees also have duties under the Act. Employees must co-operate with their employer in implementing risk control measures and they must take all reasonably practicable steps to ensure that they do not take any action or make any omission that creates or increases an existing risk to their health and safety or to that of other people at or near the workplace.

In a pandemic situation it is reasonable to expect that these obligations placed on the employee and employer will include complying with public health advice and any emergency measures.

Incident notification to Comcare of death or serious injury

Under the OHS(CE) Act, employers have an obligation to notify Comcare of incidents, if the incident causes death or serious injury to any person at the workplace or causes an employee to be incapacitated.

Comcare must be notified if an employee suffers death or serious illness from pandemic influenza, when infection and subsequent illness arises out of work performed by the employee.

In a pandemic situation where there is widespread community infection it may be very difficult to accurately determine the source of infection.

Further advice will be provided by Comcare at a later stage if a pandemic occurs within Australia.



4. Good OHS practice in pandemic planning

An organisation's business continuity plan (BCP) is a contingency plan of action to manage the business risk of a particular event. Employers are encouraged to prepare a BCP for an influenza pandemic event, and this should include consideration of OHS issues.

More information on developing business continuity plans is available from the Department of Industry, Tourism and Resources.

Good OHS practice in planning for a pandemic requires the employer to:

1. Keep informed and up-to-date on pandemic information.
2. Educate and keep employees up-to-date.
3. Undertake OHS risk management by:
 - a) managing the direct risks; and
 - b) managing the indirect risks.
4. Incorporate OHS preparations and risk control measures into a BCP.
5. Review and evaluate risk control measures.
6. Plan and manage the recovery phase of a pandemic.

Each of these items is discussed below.

4.1 Keep informed and up-to-date on pandemic information

Information on pandemic issues is readily available and regularly updated.

It is important to be familiar with the issues and be aware of the latest information available. It is important to regularly review pandemic information and to update the contents of your BCP.

Assigning responsibility to an individual(s) for monitoring influenza pandemic information is a good way to ensure that the organisation has the most up to date information. This person should also be involved in the overall pandemic and business continuity planning.

Those with management responsibility for OHS should be kept informed and up to date as should HSRs and the health and safety committee.

Key sources of information from Australian Government:

- Department of Health and Ageing (www.health.gov.au) or their information hotline on 1800 004 599).
- Department of Industry, Tourism and Resources (www.industry.gov.au).
- Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade at www.smartraveller.gov.au.

Further sources of information are listed in Appendix B.



Keep employees informed

All employees will need accurate and current information on the workplace risks associated with an influenza pandemic, as well as clear advice and education on how these risks will be controlled. Employees should be provided with information on the nature of the disease, where they can get information and actions they can take in the workplace to help control risks. Employees will also need to be informed on how they will be consulted and advised on the issues of work attendance and work arrangements.

An individual's judgement about their safety at work and associated anxiety will be influenced by the quality of information they receive from their employer on how well risks will be assessed and controlled.

Good communication strategies will need to be established, both at the workplace and for when staff are at home.

4.3 Undertake OHS risk management

As part of planning and preparedness, risk management should be applied to pandemic health and safety risks. This involves identifying and assessing the likely risks at the workplace and those risks associated with the way work is performed. Risk control measures to eliminate or minimise risks need to be determined. Risk management should be done in consultation with staff and call on expert advice when needed.

The OHS risks during a pandemic can be loosely categorised as the direct risks of infection, and the indirect risks arising from changes to usual work arrangements.

Effective development and implementation of risk control measures will depend on good consultation and communication with staff.

4.3.1 Manage the direct risks of infection

Workplace measures to contain virus transmission and prevent infection are based on an understanding of how the virus is transmitted from person to person. Infection can occur through:

- **Contact transmission** from direct person to person contact and from touching infected surfaces or from handling infected materials (the virus can survive for some hours on common surfaces) and be transmitted by hand to infect the nose, eyes or mouth);
- **Airborne droplet transmission** over a distance of about one metre, through coughs, sneezes; and
- Via **aerosol transmission** through indoor air containing concentrations of the virus suspended in moisture or dust particles.



Social distancing

A primary transmission control measure is social distancing, that is reducing and restricting physical contact and proximity. Encourage social distancing through measures such as:

- allowing only identified, essential staff to attend the workplace;
- utilising alternative work options including work from home;
- prohibiting handshaking, kissing and other physical contact in the workplace;
- maintaining a minimum distance of one metre between staff in the workplace (person to person droplet transmission is very unlikely beyond this distance);
- discontinuing meetings and all social gatherings at work including informal spontaneous congregations;
- closing service counters or installing Perspex infection control barriers; and
- using telephone and video conferencing.

Hygiene and use of personal protective equipment

Transmission can be reduced by undertaking additional cleaning at the workplace and supporting good personal hygiene.

Provide information and resources to employees to reinforce and support good personal hygiene and training on hand and respiratory hygiene (some specific guidelines are provided in Appendix A).

If the health authorities recommend some staff, for example those who develop symptoms, should wear disposable surgical masks, develop guidelines to ensure this occurs as recommended and advise employees. Ensure there is a supply of basic disposable surgical masks available at the workplace, instructions on their use and a receptacle for safe disposal (see Appendix A for more information on masks).

Develop guidelines on additional cleaning that should be undertaken, equipment that needs to be available and the responsibilities of managers and staff (see Appendix A for some examples).

Appoint an influenza manager

As part of their planning for pandemic influenza employers should consider appointing an influenza manager (and backup managers) to direct the preparation activities and manage the implementation of risk control systems. In the preparation phase this could include ensuring supply of recommended personal protective equipment, tissues and cleaning products. In the event of the pandemic, the influenza manager(s) would be responsible for control of entry to the workplace and for managing the situation when staff become ill at work.



Control entry to the workplace

Establish guidelines for restricting entry to the workplace of persons who may have influenza or who have a relatively high risk of contracting it. Based on medical advice, employers and employees will need to comply with exclusion periods for staff who are exposed to the virus, show influenza symptoms, are ill or have returned from travel to pandemic affected areas. This may include taking an employee's temperature prior to entering the workplace.

Manage the situation when staff members become ill at work

Put systems in place for managing the situation when people become ill at work. Employees who report or show influenza type symptoms should be isolated from other staff, referred to a General Practitioner for medical assessment and arrangements made for their transport, preferably not using public transport. It is important to ensure that people who are sick have safely left the workplace. A record should be kept of those who become ill and leave the workplace.

If a staff member becomes ill at work they should be given a mask to wear. It is essential that the mask is worn correctly and disposed of as soon as it becomes moist or after coughing or sneezing.

When a person with suspected influenza has left the workplace ensure that their workstation and work area is thoroughly cleaned and disinfected.

Ventilation and air conditioning

As part of preparedness employers should seek confirmation from their building owner that the air conditioning system is properly designed and maintained. Further information is outlined in the Approved Code of Practice for Indoor Air Quality available at www.comcare.gov.au/ohs/2/code.html.

All internal spaces should be well ventilated and if possible allow fresh air flow.

At this stage, for office and similar environments there is no recommendation to install special air filters to air conditioning systems.

4.3.2 Manage the indirect risks arising from changes to usual work arrangements

A pandemic will demand significant changes to work arrangements, and these new arrangements will introduce health and safety risks for staff.

Examples of these indirect risks and their controls that can be anticipated and planned for include:



Anxiety among staff

Control measures may include:

- providing staff with definitive advice on avian influenza, the risks and the control measures in place to address the risks at the workplace;
- staff counselling through an employee assistance program; and
- promoting a supportive workplace.

Employees not being aware of current arrangements

Staff will need to be kept informed on the pandemic situation and changed work arrangements while at work and at home. Effective communication strategies might include:

- regular briefings at work;
- advice on the internet;
- an information hotline; and
- phone and e-mail contacts at home.

Unfamiliar work and higher workloads

Staff may need to be reassigned to priority tasks that are unfamiliar to them. These staff may be particularly susceptible to injury while adjusting to the new work, particularly psychological injury and body stressing injury (eg manual handling sprain/strain and occupational overuse injury). Control measures for these risks could include:

- consultation with affected staff;
- training;
- clear performance expectations; and
- close supervision and support.

4.4 Incorporate OHS risk control measures into a business continuity plan

The identified risks and control measures should be incorporated into your organisation's business continuity plan (BCP). This will ensure that OHS measures are reviewed along with other parts of the plan, and that their implementation is coordinated with other pandemic management measures.

4.5 Review and evaluate control measures

OHS risk control measures should be regularly reviewed and updated as required. A good way to do this is to practice, test and evaluate intervention measures during the preparation phase, for example, practicing social distancing measures and evaluating implementation. If practical exercises and scenarios are used to test elements of pandemic preparedness, efforts should be made to include testing and evaluating of OHS measures.



4.6 Manage the recovery phase of a pandemic

Recovery should be a planned process to normalise work activities. As the pandemic subsides the local risk control measures should be progressively suspended, on a schedule compatible with the suspension of the broader public health measures.

A smooth transition will depend on effective communications with staff both in the workplace and those at home waiting to recommence normal work arrangements.

It is likely that some staff will suffer psychological consequences and access to work based counselling and support services should be available. Staff who are affected by the death of friends or family will need support. At work, counselling may be appropriate where work colleagues have died.

For some time after the pandemic, the normalising process may involve re-tasking staff to priority areas. Skills, training needs and workloads should be considered and consulted on before staff members are moved to new work.

5. Summary and Conclusion

An avian influenza pandemic will be accompanied by considerable social disruption within the community and by major workplace changes. Potential for infection at work and changed workplace arrangements will present health and safety risks. An employer's duty of care under the OHS(CE) Act is to actively identify these risks and to be prepared to implement control measures to eliminate or minimise them.

The onset of a pandemic may happen quickly, so employers should develop their business continuity plan (BCP), addressing the anticipated business risks of a pandemic and ensure the integration of OHS issues. Agencies need to keep up to date with pandemic advice and regularly review their BCPs in line with updated and new information.



Appendix A

Hygiene and cleaning

Good personal hygiene

Regular and correct hand washing

Frequent hand washing is one of the most useful ways to prevent infection. Hand washing is particularly important after coughing or sneezing, after contact with other people and before eating.

Correct hand washing technique involves: using soap and warm water, scrubbing all parts of the hand and wrist including nails and between fingers, rinse and then drying with a clean dry towel.

Employers need to provide sinks with hot and cold running water, soap, clean disposable towels and a “hands free” receptacle for disposal.

As an alternative to soap, alcohol based cleansers can be used, which are in the form of gels or rubs and wipes and do not require running water or towels. These products usually have a three year shelf life and should not be exposed to heat or direct sunlight.

Coughing and sneezing etiquette

When coughing or sneezing, the nose and mouth should be covered with a disposable tissue which must be used only once and then disposed in suitable receptacle. Hands should be washed after coughing or sneezing or touching used tissues.

Employers will need to provide plenty of tissues and a “hands free” waste receptacle. Signs on correct coughing and sneezing etiquette can be put up in the workplace to reinforce this message.

Further information on infection control is available from www.health.gov.au/pandemic.

Personal protective equipment

If recommended by health authorities, the wearing of basic disposable surgical masks by *staff who develop symptoms* at work may prevent suspected virus transmission. Masks must be removed and disposed of safely when they become moist, or after coughing and sneezing. So as not to spread infection it is important that masks are correctly applied, not touched or handled when worn and are correctly disposed of.

Other masks which are designed to filter airborne particles may be recommended for people who have a greater risk of exposure to the virus such as health care and quarantine workers.



Further information on personal protective equipment and its correct use is available from the Department of Health and Ageing website at www.health.gov.au/pandemic.

Additional workplace cleaning

Employers will need to implement additional regular cleaning for workstations, telephones, frequently touched surfaces such as door handles, and the cleaning and disinfection of workstations of employees who become ill at work. Areas where there is public access will also require frequent additional cleaning and disinfecting.

Cleaning of environmental surfaces with a neutral detergent followed by a disinfectant solution is recommended. Alcohol wipes could be provided for telephones.



Appendix B

Further sources of information

Australian Government

Department of Health and Ageing for a range of pandemic and health related information including the *Australian Health Management Plan for Pandemic Influenza 2006* at www.health.gov.au and their information telephone line on 1800 004 599.

Department of Industry, Tourism and Resources for information on business continuity planning including *Business Continuity Guide for Australian Business* at www.industry.gov.au/pandemicbusinesscontinuity.

Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade at www.smartraveller.gov.au which provides advice for overseas travellers.

Department of the Prime Minister and Cabinet's *National Action Plan for Human Influenza Pandemic* at www.pmc.gov.au/publications/pandemic/index.htm.

Other websites

The Fluready website has guidance called *Avian Influenza and Business Continuity Management – an Australian Perspective* as well as some planning tools at www.fluready.net.

New Zealand Government - for detail on workplace issues *New Zealand Planning guide for Pandemic Influenza* available at www.med.govt.nz.

World Health Organization information on the global pandemic phases at www.who.int/csr/disease/avian_influenza/en/index.html.