



# Human Resources Guide: Swine Flu: Pandemic Flu Guidance for Employers

The swine flu virus is now a global pandemic. The government has predicted that the first wave of swine flu will happen between August and November 2009 and that around 30% of the public will be infected. Further, that by September 2009, absence rates for illness amongst employees could reach 12%.

Employers have a key role to play in protecting employees' health and safety as well as slowing down the spread and negative impact of swine flu on the economy and society generally.

This guide considers the likely implications of the swine flu pandemic for employers. It also provides advice on the measures that may be taken by employers to protect business continuity and the health and safety of their employees.

## Impact on your workplace

Swine flu will affect business and commerce at a national and global level; it will also affect local economies. In terms of its affect on individual organisations/workforces, however, the following potential impacts are likely:

- **Absenteeism** – employees may be absent because they are sick or because they are caring for sick family members. Schools and nurseries may close so parents will need to be at home to look after their children. Some employees may be too afraid to come to work for fear of catching swine flu.
- **Presenteeism** – some employees do come to work even when they are sick. Employers should discourage sick employees from attending the workplace.
- **Commercial disruption** – if your customer base is affected badly by swine flu, you may see orders and sales reduce. It may also become difficult for your business to recover monies owed to it. Where swine flu affects your suppliers, it may become hard for your business to receive key goods and services. Additionally, your workforce will be reduced, so that there are fewer employees to deal with these issues.

## What can your organisation do?

Forward planning is essential, no matter how unpredictable the pandemic might be. Most business continuity programmes focus on dealing with a “short, sharp, shock,” such as a fire or terrorist attack. Pandemic flu plans, however, need to take account of changed ways of working that may last for many months.

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With this in mind, the following measures are recommended to employers as a means of managing and reducing the spread of swine flu in the workplace:

- Develop a pandemic influenza response plan. Proper planning will enable your business to respond effectively to changes in staffing levels and commercial patterns and deal with potential disruptions to the supply of goods or services.
- Devise a strategy for high levels of staff absence. This may include: establishing minimum staffing levels; identifying a 'front-line' group of essential employees; developing a contingency management plan; identifying a source of back-up staff, e.g. agency workers or volunteers; using staff with inter-changeable skills and/or allowing staff to work remotely.
- Review and update any policies or procedures which may be affected by the outbreak of swine flu. These are likely to relate to sickness absence, dependant care-leave and flexible/home working.
- Keep up to date with swine flu symptoms and government advice (see [www.direct.gov.uk](http://www.direct.gov.uk)). You need to be able to recognise the symptoms in yourself and in your staff and you need to make sure that you keep your staff informed.
- Communicate with and train your workforce on the key facts and risks of swine flu. An emergency plan, including contact details of employees and emergency contact details for management should be circulated.
- Ensure good hygiene practices in the workplace and ask employees to report to HR if they have flu like symptoms before sending them home.

## Conclusion

Whatever the eventual scale of swine flu, employers will be important players in slowing down the spread of the disease and limiting its impact. The earlier your business takes steps to manage and control the pandemic, the better placed it will be to survive it unscathed.

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