

The "C-Change" Initiative:

1. Change behaviors.
2. Challenge ourselves to re-think how we work.
3. Certify the results on a daily basis.



## ***Toolbox Talk***

*Week of 5/24/10*

### **Pandemic Influenza Preparation (Part 4)**

#### **Introduction**

A pandemic is a global disease outbreak. An influenza pandemic occurs when a new influenza virus for which there is little or no immunity emerges in the human population, begins to cause serious illness and then spreads. A worldwide influenza pandemic could have a major effect on the global economy, including travel, trade, tourism, food consumption and eventually, investment and financial markets. Planning for pandemic influenza by business and industry is essential to minimize its impact. As with any catastrophe, having a contingency plan is essential.

**Seasonal Influenza** refers to the periodic outbreaks of respiratory illness in the Fall and Winter in North America. Outbreaks are typically limited; most people have some immunity to the circulating strain of the virus. A vaccine is prepared in advance of the seasonal influenza and is designed to match the influenza viruses most likely to be circulating in the community. Employees living abroad and international business travelers should note that other geographic areas (for example, the Southern Hemisphere) have different influenza seasons which may require different vaccines.

**Pandemic Influenza** refers to a worldwide outbreak of influenza that occurs when a new strain of the virus emerges and spreads from person to person. During the early phases of an influenza pandemic, people may not have any natural immunity to the new strain; so the disease would spread rapidly among the population. A vaccine to protect people against illness from a pandemic influenza virus may not be widely available until many months after an influenza pandemic begins. Pandemics have occurred throughout history and many scientists believe that it is only a matter of time before another one occurs. Pandemics can vary in severity from a bad flu season to an especially severe outbreak that could lead to high levels of illness, death, social disruption and economic loss. It is impossible to predict when the next pandemic will occur or whether it will be mild or severe.

#### **How a Pandemic Could Affect Workplaces**

Unlike natural disasters or terrorist events, an influenza pandemic will be widespread, affecting multiple regions at the same time. A pandemic could also be an extended event, with multiple waves of outbreaks in the same geographic area, with each outbreak lasting from 6 to 8 weeks. Waves of outbreaks may occur over a year or more.

If this event occurs, your workplace will likely experience the following:

**Absenteeism** - A pandemic could affect as many as 40 percent of the workforce during periods of peak influenza illness. Employees could be absent because they are fearful, sick, must care for sick family members or for children, if schools or day care centers are closed.

**Change in Patterns of Commerce** - During a pandemic, consumer demand for items related to infection control is likely to increase dramatically, while consumer interest in other goods may decline. Consumers may shop at off-peak hours to reduce contact with other people, increase usage of home delivery services, or prefer other options, such as drive-through service.

**Interrupted Supply/Delivery** - Shipments of items from geographic areas severely affected by a pandemic may be delayed or cancelled.

Transmission of community-acquired respiratory infections occurs most commonly through inhalation of respiratory droplets produced by talking, coughing, spitting and sneezing. Respiratory droplets may also survive for brief periods (depending on the ambient temperature) on hands, clothes and surfaces. Take these precautions:

- Coughs and sneezes should be covered with a tissue, cloth (including one's sleeve) or mask.
- Hands must be washed after direct contact with respiratory secretions and after contact with sick individuals (i.e. after contact with hands or potentially contaminated surfaces).
- Surfaces should be cleaned regularly with soap and water (or other disinfection fluids such as bleach or chlorine) to avoid self-contamination (i.e. touching the mouth, nose or eyes after touching a contaminated area).
- Masks are not recommended for generalized (community) use.

In Part 2 we will discuss reducing your risk and steps to take should a pandemic event occur.