

10 Steps to Pandemic Preparedness



Coronavirus represents the third pandemic threat posed to Canada in the past few years. In 2007, it was avian influenza; in 2010, it was H1N1. It has now become incumbent on organizations to prepare for disruptions and institute plans to maintain operations in the event of pandemic. As HR director, you should play a significant role in pandemic planning at your organization. Here's a look at the 10 steps to take.

Pandemic Preparedness & OHS Laws

Employers have a duty under OHS laws to protect workers from not only injuries but also illnesses, including infectious illnesses like coronavirus and even the seasonal flu. This duty is implied under the "general duty" clause contained within each jurisdiction's OHS act, which requires employers to provide a safe and healthy workplace and take measures to address foreseeable hazards that aren't specifically mentioned in the OHS laws. None can possibly deny that the risk of contracting and spreading coronavirus is foreseeable; and so it would be covered by the general duty clause.

HOW TO COMPLY

To make sure that your company and its workforce is adequately prepared for pandemic and other infectious illnesses take the following steps:

Step #1: Get Organized

Don't try to prepare the company for pandemic on your own. Instead, form a committee to spearhead the planning efforts. This committee should be led by a senior member of management and include:

- The safety coordinator;
- The person in charge of emergency planning (if that person isn't the safety coordinator); and
- Someone familiar with labour issues.

In addition, make sure that the workplace joint health and safety committee (JHSC) is involved in the planning process. The committee should begin by

establishing contacts in each business unit to monitor workers' health. It should also designate someone to stay in touch with the local Ministry of Health and other reliable public sources of information about the coronavirus situation in Canada, your jurisdiction and your community.

Steps #2: Assess the Risks

The committee should assess the risk of workers getting the illness and the impact it would have on operations if a significant number of workers got sick at once. For example, could an outbreak threaten the viability of any unit or facility? Also assess the impact that a pandemic could have on the company even if its workers don't fall ill. For example, could the government take over parts of your workforce or facility to perform emergency services?

| IS IT A COLD OR THE FLU? | | |
|---|----------------------------|--|
| COLD | SYMPTOM | FLU |
| Rare | Fever | Usual high fever (102°F/39°C to 104°F/40°C); sudden onset; lasts 3-4 days |
| Rare | Headache | Usual—can be severe |
| Sometimes, mild | General aches and pains | Usual—often severe |
| Sometimes, mild | Fatigue and weakness | Usual, severe, can last 2-3 weeks or more |
| Unusual | Extreme fatigue | Usual, early onset, can be severe |
| Common | Runny, stuffy nose | Common |
| Common | Sneezing | Sometimes |
| Common | Sore throat | Common |
| Sometimes, mild to moderate | Chest discomfort, coughing | Usual, can be severe |
| Can lead to sinus congestion or earache | Complications | Can lead to pneumonia and respiratory failure; Can worsen a current chronic condition; Can be life-threatening |
| PREVENTION | | |

| | | |
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| wash hands Frequently cough/sneeze into your sleeve | | annual vaccination wash hands frequently cough/sneeze into your sleeve |
|--|--|---|

Step #3: Protect Workers' Health

The best way to handle a potential outbreak is to take steps to keep workers from getting sick in the first place. So, educate workers on personal hygiene and other measures for guarding against the risk of infection, including:

- Hand washing;
- "Cough etiquette," that is, coughing in the crook of your arm as opposed to your hands;
- Social distancing;
- Proper use of PPE, such as facemasks and respirators;
- Vaccination; and
- Precautions for workers planning to travel to affected areas.

One of the most important steps you can take is to encourage your workers to get vaccinated. Unfortunately, there's no vaccine for coronavirus yet. But there are vaccines for other pathogens, including flu. You may want to consider establishing flu clinics in your workplace, especially if you have onsite medical staff. Workers are more likely to get vaccinated if it's convenient. (The Public Health Agency of Canada has information on setting up a workplace flu clinic.) It's also a good idea to post the location of hospitals, clinics, public health authorities and other health resources in the workplace.

Step #4: Adjust Your HR Policies

Make sure the company's HR policies are adjusted to deal with a potential pandemic. For example, ensure that policies and practices for obtaining, disclosing and using workers' medical information, such as to verify their illness and determine their needs for accommodation, comply with privacy laws. And make sure that supervisors understand how workers' right to refuse dangerous work applies in the context of fear of exposure to the infectious illnesses.

Step #5: Create Business Continuity Plan

Every company should have a business continuity plan setting out the steps it will take to keep operations going in the event of an emergency, such as a natural disaster or fire. This plan should also cover pandemic. For example, if more than half of the workers in one unit are out sick, you'll need to determine if you can do without that unit temporarily and, if not, how you can still keep it operating, such as by transferring workers from another unit.

Step #6: Prepare for Service & Supply Disruptions

Your company can be impacted by an outbreak even if its own workers stay relatively healthy. How? If other companies that you depend on, such as

suppliers and truckers, lose a large part of their workforce due to the illness, they may not be able to meet your supply or transportation needs. So, it's critical that you identify alternative sources for those goods and services and/or start building (or adding to existing) stockpiles and reserves.

Step #7: Prepare for Absences

If despite the company's best efforts, many workers come down with coronavirus or other infectious illness, you'll need a plan in place to deal with their absences. For example, determine the minimum staff you need to maintain critical business functions. And identify the credentials workers need to fill those functions, such as licences to operate heavy machinery.

Step #8: Establish Ways to Communicate with Workers

In the event of pandemic, it's important to communicate key information with workers, such as symptoms of a new strain of the illness and the availability of vaccines. So, establish those lines of communication *now*.

Step #9: Establish Lines of Communication with Business Principles

Identify the company's key customers, partners, suppliers and other business relations and establish means of communicating with them in the event of a pandemic or outbreak

Step #10: Prepare a Plan

Document all of the committee's planning efforts taken in Steps 1 through 9 in a written pandemic plan. Give a draft of the plan to senior managers, business unit leaders and the JHSC or worker representative for internal review. Also ask key suppliers, customers, partners and local government and health officials to review it. Adopt any appropriate changes or suggestions into the final plan and then give it to everyone in the company.