

Flu Risks: What HR Should Do



Preventing flu from spreading in the workplace isn't just a business imperative but a legal obligation. Specifically, there are 2 things you're expected to do:

1. Educate their employees; and
2. Take infection control measures.

1. The Duty to Educate

Employers must educate employees about the risk of influenza and other outbreaks of infectious illness.

General Education: You should familiarize employees with the nature of the risk posed by the particular illness—what it is, how it can infect them, and how to protect themselves. The easiest way to do this is to download and distribute copies of the free materials available on the web including notably from the Public Health Agency of Canada website , your provincial Health Ministry and the World Health Organization.

Prevention Measures: You should acquaint your employees with personal hygiene and other measures for guarding against the risk of infection, including:

- Hand washing.
- "Cough etiquette".
- Social distancing.
- Proper use of personal protective equipment (PPE).
- Vaccination.
- Precautions for employees planning to travel to affected areas.

Notification & Communication: Education also involves keeping your employees apprised of recent developments, both public and within your workplace. Employers should provide "clear, timely and proactive communication to staff, including how your organization is handling the situation," stress Ontario Government Guidelines. This would involve posting information on your company website and/or starting an internal phone service that workers can call for information. Also post the location of hospitals, clinics, public health authorities and other health resources in your community. In addition, you need to establish and maintain communication with any of your employees who are absent due to infection.

2. The Duty to Control Workplace Infection

The heart of the employer's duty is to implement countermeasures to minimize the risk of infection in the workplace, including:

- Basic hygiene measures such as furnishing soap, anti-bacterial products and paper towels and keeping sinks and surfaces that people touch, e.g., door knobs, clean.
- Posting signs, posters and notices reminding employees to wash their hands properly, use cough etiquette, keep social distances, etc.
- Adopting work practices that promote social distance, for example, using conference calls instead of face-to-face meetings.
- Adopting design measures such as keeping workstations as far apart as possible.
- Screening employees and visitors entering the workplace for signs of influenza.
- Providing employees protective gloves, surgical masks and other PPE; and
- Managing cases of infection at work, including telling those suspected of having influenza to go home immediately and monitoring which employees get infected, where they work, etc.