

Swine Flu Pandemic in your Workplace

The following guidelines are developed in line with publications by WorkSafe Victoria and the World Health Organisation and reflect the relevant Victorian industrial relations laws, especially the Occupational Health & Safety Act 2004.

It is strongly urged that members contact the ADA HR advisory service to discuss their particular situation prior to acting on this information.

Employers' Duty of Care

The Victorian OH&S Act requires employers to take all steps that are considered reasonably practicable to ensure a safe and healthy workplace for all employees. In the present circumstances it is reasonably foreseeable that an influenza pandemic will occur and therefore employers have a duty of care to take reasonable and practical steps to control and minimise this risk.

Duties of Employees

Employees also have a duty under the Act. Employees must cooperate with their employer in the implementation of any risk control measures. They must also take all reasonable steps to ensure that they do not do anything that increases the risks to the health and safety of themselves or others.

OHS Risk Management

As part of any OH&S planning it is essential that employers adopt a risk identification and risk management approach. This involves identifying any likely risks within the workplace. With an influenza virus this may also involve not only looking at the potential of exposure to the virus within the workplace but also the potential exposure of employees to the virus outside of the workplace as the risk of transmission is high. Once the risks of exposure have been identified, risk control measures should be implemented to eliminate or minimise the risk. (Note: any risk management system should prioritise risk elimination first, and where the risk elimination is not practical, should seek to minimise the risk). The following list of risk control measures is not exhaustive however it is generally accepted that these four points will form the basis of any comprehensive risk management plan.

Social Distancing

A primary measure of risk control, social distancing involves reducing and restricting physical contact and proximity. Social distancing measures may include:

- Allowing only identified and essential employees to attend work
- Prohibiting physical contact within the workplace
- Prohibiting "high risk" employees from attending the workplace until medical clearance is received.

Hygiene and the use of personal protective equipment (PPE)

The chance of transmission can be reduced by undertaking additional cleaning at the workplace and supporting good personal hygiene. Although dental practices already have stringent infection control measures, it may be timely for practices to revisit these procedures which may include the reception/front desk area and re-training staff. All high-risk people or those who have contracted influenza should not to return the workplace unless they have received written medical clearance.

HR MATTERS

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Control entry to the workplace

Guidelines should be developed for restricting entry to the practice of those people who may have influenza or who have a relatively high risk of contracting it. Based on medical advice, employers and employees should comply with all exclusion or incubation periods for employees who are exposed to the virus, show signs or symptoms of influenza or who have recently returned from travel to a pandemic area.

Ventilation and Air-conditioning

Employers should ensure that their air-conditioning and ventilation systems are properly designed and well maintained. All internal spaces should be well ventilated and if possible, fresh air should be allowed to flow.

Summary

An influenza pandemic will be accompanied by significant wide spread disruption to the community and workplaces. An employer's duty of care under the OH&S Act is to actively identify the risks of contracting the virus in the workplace and implement measures to eliminate or control them. An employee has the obligation to comply with all reasonable requests made by the employer.

Members who have any concerns or would like to seek advice on developing a risk management plan should contact the ADA HR Advisory Service

Before acting on any of the information in the above article, please contact the friendly team at the ADA HR Advisory Service on:

Phone: 1300 232 462

Fax: (02) 9993 9709

Email: hrhotline@ada.org.au

The ADA HR Advisory Service is Available from 8:30 am- 5:00 pm Monday to Friday.