

## Pandemic Flu Risk and Workplace Preparedness

This article by Continuum EAP's Kevin J. Mattran was originally published in the Lincoln Human Resource Management Association newsletter in August of 2006.

As EAP professionals, we have been getting more and more questions about the H5N1 virus or "Avian Flu." The virus presents a significant risk that should be taken seriously. In this article, I hope to provide information that will be a good starting point for developing a plan at your company.

### ***The Bird Flu and Pandemic Risk***

First of all, the H5N1 virus occurs mainly in birds. It was first identified in humans in 1997 in Hong Kong. At this point the virus does not seem to be passed easily from human to human. Direct contact with the feces (or surfaces and objects contaminated with the feces) of infected birds is considered the foremost route to human infection. *It is safe to eat properly cooked poultry products.*

A pandemic is a wide spread outbreak of a disease involving a large number of people over a large geographical area. A pandemic can start when three conditions have been met: 1) a new influenza virus subtype emerges, 2) it infects humans causing serious illness and 3) it spreads easily among humans. The H5N1 virus has met the first two conditions. The "avian flu" virus is new to humans and it has infected more than 100 people, killing more than half of them. The start of a pandemic becomes more likely as more human cases are reported. The virus may adapt and make sustained human-to-human transmission possible.

A vaccine for H5N1 is not yet available. The United States has announced that it will be stockpiling doses of an experimental vaccine, but its effectiveness is not yet known. Antiviral medications like Tamiflu and Relenza can be effective in reducing the severity of symptoms.

### ***Pandemic Flu Planning***

The principle objective of a pandemic flu plan should be to maintain the continuity of operations. A good plan will identify which services and positions are essential to business operations. Organizations should consider how to replace essential services and personnel in times of high absenteeism, and what non-essential services could be cancelled or suspended. Management could also look at what sorts of flexibility is possible by cross-training employees, using flextime, telecommuting etc. Companies should also



be familiar with state and federal pandemic flu plans. Federal and state plans can be found at [www.pandemicflu.gov](http://www.pandemicflu.gov).

An important issue for human resources professionals to consider is that many employees may require more sick time than is offered in their benefits package. Will your current attendance policy discourage employees from staying at home when they are ill?

### ***The Role of EAP***

Your EAP can assist you with your pandemic flu plan in a number of ways:

- EAP consultants can assist in the establishment of a pandemic plan.
- Your EAP can point you to resources with up-to-date information about H5N1.
- EAP can help with counseling for employees who might be unusually anxious about the possibility of a pandemic flu.
- EAP can also provide counseling for employees and their families affected by a flu pandemic.

EAP professionals can work together with your wellness program to communicate best practices for the prevention of the spread of viruses to your employees.

Some recent natural disasters have demonstrated all too well the need for good planning. A pandemic flu plan should be a part of a company's broader disaster planning. We all hope that a widespread influenza event does not happen, but being aware and prepared can certainly lessen the impact of such an event. The websites listed below can be valuable sources of information to assist with the development of your plan:

- [www.who.int](http://www.who.int) -The World Health Organization
- [www.cdc.gov](http://www.cdc.gov) -United States Centers for Disease Control and Prevention
- [www.fluwiki.com](http://www.fluwiki.com) - Flu Wiki (an independent collaborative effort helping communities prepare for pandemic influenza)

*For help in dealing with this or other issues, contact Continuum EAP at: (402) 476-0186 or (800) 755-7636*

*You may also contact an employee assistance professional at: [easpecialist@4continuum.com](mailto:easpecialist@4continuum.com)*



- EMPLOYEE ASSISTANCE
- TRAINING
- CONSULTING