



PANDEMIC **(H1N1) 2009** **INFLUENZA** GUIDANCE FOR FUNERAL DIRECTORS

Produced jointly by the Department of Health and the Health Protection Agency in collaboration with the National Association of Funeral Directors, the Society of Allied and Independent Funeral Directors, and the Health and Safety Executive

Everyone is involved in the response to the current influenza (flu) pandemic by managing the impact it will have on society and preventing further spread of the infection.

This guidance explains how funeral directors, embalmers and other staff, in the course of their daily work, can protect themselves, their colleagues and their families, and prevent the spread of flu.

This guidance replaces Pandemic flu: Guidance for Funeral Directors and provides specific information about the current pandemic.

WHAT IS PANDEMIC (H1N1) 2009 FLU?

Flu is a familiar infection in the UK, especially during the winter months. The illness, caused by the flu virus, can be mild or severe and, at times, can lead to death.

Pandemic flu is different from ordinary flu because it occurs when a new flu virus emerges into the human population and spreads from person-to-person worldwide. As it is a new virus, no one will have any immunity to it and the entire population is susceptible.

In mid-April 2009, a new flu virus was detected in Mexico and California, this virus is known as pandemic (H1N1) 2009 influenza but is often referred to as “swine flu”. The first cases were reported in the UK on the 27th April 2009. Since then this new virus has spread around the world, with a first wave of infections in the UK during June and July 2009. A second wave of infections is expected in the autumn and winter of 2009/2010. Current Department of Health predictions are that up to 12% of the population may develop symptoms of pandemic flu between October 2009 and the end of the flu season¹.

WHAT ARE THE SIGNS AND SYMPTOMS OF PANDEMIC (H1N1) 2009 FLU?

The signs and symptoms of pandemic (H1N1) 2009 flu are similar to ordinary (seasonal) flu but may be more severe and cause more serious complications.

The most significant symptoms are the sudden onset of:

- Fever
- Cough or shortness of breath

Other symptoms may include:

- Headache
- Tiredness
- Chills
- Aching muscles
- Sore throat
- Runny nose
- Sneezing
- Loss of appetite
- Diarrhoea
- Vomiting

The incubation period (time between contact with the virus and the onset of symptoms)

This can be up to 7 days but is most likely to be between two and five days.

¹Department of Health and Cabinet Office. Swine flu: Guidance for planners. 22nd October 2009.
http://www.dh.gov.uk/prod_consum_dh/groups/dh_digitalassets/@dh/@en/@ps/@sta/@perf/documents/digitalasset/dh_107428.pdf

The infectious period (how long you are infectious to others)

People are most infectious in the first 3 days after they develop symptoms and continue to be infectious while they have symptoms, usually for about seven days. People become less infectious as their symptoms subside and once symptoms are gone, they are considered no longer infectious to others. Children and people who are immunosuppressed (their immune systems do not work normally) may keep shedding the virus (and may be infectious) for longer.

WHAT SHOULD YOU DO IF YOU HAVE SYMPTOMS OR ARE ILL?

If you feel ill whilst at work,

- Do not simply carry on working.
- Report it immediately to your manager or occupational health department.
- You should go home until you are free of symptoms
- You can check your symptoms at the following websites www.nhs.uk or www.direct.gov.uk/pandemicflu.
- If you don't have access to the internet or you are still concerned, call the National Pandemic Flu Service (NPFS) on 0800 1513 513 or visit www.pandemicflu.direct.gov.uk or contact your GP by telephone.
- Certain groups are advised to contact their doctor rather than use the National Pandemic Flu Service. These are: people with serious underlying health conditions; pregnant women; children under one; or children whose condition suddenly gets worse; and those whose condition is still getting worse after 7 days (5 days for a child).

If you develop symptoms whilst not at work:

- Stay at home
- Phone your supervisor/manager or occupational health department
- Do not go to work until you are fully recovered
- For those with internet access you can check your symptoms by going to www.nhs.uk or www.direct.gov.uk/pandemicflu.
- If you don't have access to the internet or are still concerned, call the National Pandemic Flu Service (NPFS) on 0800 1513 513 or visit www.pandemicflu.direct.gov.uk or contact your GP by telephone.
- Certain groups are advised to contact their doctor rather than use the National Pandemic Flu Service. These are: people with serious underlying health conditions; pregnant women; children under one; or children whose condition suddenly gets worse; and those whose condition is still getting worse after 7 days (5 days for a child).

HOW IS PANDEMIC (H1N1) 2009 FLU CAUGHT AND SPREAD TO OTHERS?

Flu, including pandemic flu, is spread from person-to-person by close contact.

Some examples of how it can be spread include:

- Coughing and/or sneezing by an infected person within a short distance (usually one metre or less) of you.
- Touching or shaking the hand of an infected person and then touching your mouth, eyes or nose without first washing your hands.
- Touching surfaces or objects (eg door handles) that have become contaminated with the flu virus and then touching your mouth, eyes or nose without first washing your hands.

On hard, non-porous surfaces (e.g. stainless steel counter or plastic bowls), flu virus is able to survive and pose an infection risk for up to 24 hours. On tissues, flu virus is able to survive and pose an infection risk about 15 minutes. Survival on other soft surfaces (e.g. clothes, handkerchiefs, soft furnishings) is likely to be similar to survival on tissues.

WHAT CAN YOU DO TO PROTECT YOURSELF AND OTHERS FROM PANDEMIC (H1N1) 2009 FLU?

- “Catch it, Bin it, Kill it”
 - Carry disposable tissues.
 - Use a tissue to cover your nose and mouth when coughing and/or sneezing.
 - Dispose of the tissue promptly.
 - Wash your hands.
- Clean hands frequently with soap and water, especially after coughing, sneezing, and using tissues. Wash your hands as soon as you get to work, before leaving work and soon after you arrive home. An alcohol handrub can be used as an alternative way of cleaning hands if they are not visibly dirty.
- Avoid touching your mouth, eyes and/or nose, unless you have recently cleaned your hands.
- Used tissues should be put in a waste bin immediately after use or as soon as is feasible. Tissues should be disposed of in domestic waste and do not require any special treatment.
- Do not use cloth handkerchiefs or reuse tissues. Reusing tissues or handkerchiefs may contaminate pockets or handbags which may then recontaminate hands every time they go into those pockets or handbags.
- Normal household detergent and water can be used to clean surfaces frequently touched by hands.

WHAT PERSONAL PROTECTIVE EQUIPMENT (PPE) SHOULD I WEAR AT WORK?

- Ensure that you are aware of your employer's procedures regarding personal protective equipment (PPE) and that you are using them correctly.
- Use the PPE (usually aprons, surgical masks and gloves) as directed by your manager, when there is a risk of contamination from respiratory secretions.
- Used PPE can be disposed of in domestic waste, preferably in tied black bags. There is no need for non-healthcare settings to introduce clinical waste procedures for the disposal of PPE during an influenza pandemic.

WHAT CAN YOU DO TO PREPARE FOR PANDEMIC (H1N1) 2009 FLU?

Pandemic flu is spreading fast in the UK. Prepare now by:

- Learning to recognise the symptoms of pandemic (H1N1) 2009 flu
- Being aware of your employer's guidance and procedures relating to pandemic flu
- Establishing 'flu friends' - friends and relatives who can help if you fall ill
- Keeping paracetamol-based cold remedies and tissues in the house
- Having a thermometer available so you can check your temperature if needed

Note: If you have elderly or vulnerable neighbours please check on them. They may need your help but be reluctant to ask for it.

SPECIFIC ISSUES FOR FUNERAL DIRECTORS

Risk assessment

The risk of infection from cadavers affected by pandemic flu is low and is minimised by the use of strict infection control procedures including the use of appropriate protective clothing. This guidance does not replace the Health and Safety Executive document *Controlling the risks of infection at work from human remains: A guide for those involved in funeral services (including embalmers) and those involved in exhumation*, but acts to provide additional information and guidance in relation to pandemic H1N1 2009 influenza.

In addition, funeral directors may find the risk assessment model outlined in *Pandemic flu: a guide for businesses* useful. This document will help to identify environmental, organisational, and individual behaviour measures to reduce transmission of infection from an individual(s) with flu like symptoms to a susceptible person, and/or reduce the risk of susceptible people becoming infected.

Identifying those who have died of influenza

In some circumstances, funeral directors may know that pandemic influenza was the cause of death. Some deaths due to pandemic influenza will be unrecognised and some will die with influenza but not of it. This reinforces the importance of universal precautions.

Hand hygiene

Hand hygiene (either handwashing or the use of alcohol handrub) is key in infection control, including for flu. You should wash your hands after any contact with a body (even if gloves are worn), before eating, drinking or smoking, and before leaving work.

Collection of the deceased

If the body is being collected from home and others in the house are unwell with a flu like illness, avoid close contact (within 1m) with those who are unwell.

Hands should be cleaned after handling the deceased, and after leaving the house. The use of alcohol handrub may be most practical in such circumstances.

Body bags

Body bags are not necessary for cadavers where flu has been implicated in the death, unless it is thought likely that there would be leakage in transit, or the bodies are otherwise offensive.

Laying out

Hygienic preparation of bodies is permissible. For laying out, gloves and aprons should be worn for bodies where flu has been implicated in the death. If there is a risk of splashes to the face, a face mask and eye protection should be worn.

In some cultures and religious groups, relatives expect to carry out the ritual preparation before the funeral and, in most cases, this can be permitted but they should be advised to wear gloves and simple protective plastic aprons, and to wash their hands with soap and water afterwards.

Viewing and touching the face is permitted except where there is a risk of infection other than influenza. For other infections, a risk assessment will be required.

Embalming

Embalming involves the injection of formalin containing solutions, and therefore the risk of infection is reduced for most infectious diseases including flu. The embalming solution may not penetrate mucus in the upper respiratory tract, and an infection risk remains.

Standard health and safety precautions for embalming continue to apply. Usual PPE for embalming (one piece overall/boiler suit or scrubs (can be disposable), a full length plastic apron, waterproof boots, protective single-use gloves) will protect against flu. If there is a risk of splashes to face, a face mask and eye protection should be worn. Any action that will bring a staff member's hands in contact with their face whilst undertaking an embalming procedure should be avoided. Eating, smoking or drinking must be banned within work areas.

Environmental procedures

For general cleaning of the environment, a general purpose detergent and warm water are sufficient to inactivate the flu virus. No special arrangements for waste disposal or cleaning are required where influenza has been implicated in the death.

YOUR BUSINESS MAY WORK DIFFERENTLY DURING THE PANDEMIC

During the flu pandemic, your business may work in a different way from usual. There may be an increased number of deaths over a fairly short period of time. Local authorities have plans to deal with any increase in the number of cadavers that may require burial or cremation. This might involve special storage facilities for cadavers or for crematoria or cemeteries to operate on an extended or 24-hour basis.

There may also be staff shortages due to illness in employees and their families.

MORE INFORMATION ON PANDEMIC (H1N1) 2009 FLU

Go to www.nhs.uk for health information

Go to Directgov www.direct.gov.uk for cross-government information on pandemic flu, including latest advice on travel, schools and other public services

Go to BusinessLink www.businesslink.gov.uk for information to help businesses deal with the effects of swine flu

Go to the Health Protection Agency website www.hpa.org.uk for more information on pandemic (H1N1) 2009 influenza

Infection control training materials aimed primarily at the healthcare sector can be accessed at: www.dh.gov.uk/en/PandemicFlu/DH_078752 . This includes posters on the correct use of personal protective equipment (PPE) and effective hand hygiene.

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November 2009