

Pandemic Influenza – A Guide for Water and Wastewater Plant Owners and Operators



What is pandemic influenza?

A pandemic is a global disease outbreak. A flu pandemic occurs when a new influenza virus emerges for which people have little or no immunity, and for which there is no vaccine. The disease spreads easily person-to-person, causes serious illness, and can sweep across the country and around the world in very short time. Health experts agree that a pandemic will occur; it is just a question of when and in what form. Any planning for such an event will eventually be put to use.

What impact will a pandemic have?

If Ohio experiences a pandemic of similar severity to the Spanish Flu of 1918, up to 67,000 people could be hospitalized and one to three million could seek medical care.

Employee absenteeism attributable to illness, the need to care for ill family members, and the fear of infection may reach 40 percent during the peak weeks of a community outbreak. Certain public health measures (closing schools and daycares, quarantining household contacts of infected individuals) are likely to increase absenteeism.

In an affected community, a pandemic outbreak will last about six to eight weeks. In a pandemic, outbreaks may occur at the same time across the country and state and federal resources are expected to quickly reach overflow capacity. That is why all businesses and organizations, including water and wastewater treatment facilities, need to be informed and prepared.

What can your plant do to prepare?

Owners and operators of water and wastewater plants need to prepare their own plans for continuing services to the extent possible during an event such as pandemic influenza. The Department of Health and Human Services (HHS) and the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) have developed checklists for planning for pandemic influenza.

PLANNING FOR A PANDEMIC

- Review and update your contingency/emergency response plan to address:
 - reduced operational staff (consider additional automation, basic written instructions for essential equipment and activities, cross-training and mutual-aid agreements);
 - problems with equipment and supplies, such as chemical deliveries (stocking a three month supply is recommended if possible, or maintain as large a supply as possible and identify back-up suppliers); and
 - problems with other utilities, such as electricity.
- Develop communication mechanisms and strategies with templates for public notices.
- Conduct regular drills and exercises.
- Coordinate with your local Emergency Management Agency.
- Stay informed.
- Encourage employee health and safety.

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SAFETY TIPS

1. Cover your cough with a tissue and immediately dispose of the tissue in a wastebasket.
2. If you cannot cover your cough with a tissue, use your arm. Covering with your hand more readily leads to spreading germs.
3. If you are ill, especially with a fever, stay home from work. No one should be at work with a fever at any time.
4. Wash your hands frequently during the day. Hand washing should be done before and after eating, coughing and after using the rest room.
5. Maintain a distance of three feet or more from anyone who is coughing and ask that person to cover his/her cough.
6. Stockpile at least one week of food, water and medical supplies in case you need to remain in your home for several days.

The checklists – available at www.pandemicflu.gov/plan/checklists.html – identify important, specific activities you can do now to prepare. Many are specific to pandemic influenza, but a number also pertain to any public health emergency.

U.S. EPA's list of "Top Ten Steps" water utilities can take to prepare for pandemics is available at www.epa.gov/ne/eco/drinkwater/pdfs/TopTenPandemicDisaster.pdf. Although this was written for drinking water plants, almost all of the information is relevant for wastewater plants too.

What should you tell your employees?

Educating your staff will be imperative during a pandemic. Facility management should develop outreach materials and methods of distribution to make sure employees understand the nature of pandemic flu and how to protect themselves and their families from contracting the virus.

Many educational materials, including fact sheets, brochures, sample newsletter articles and posters, are available for your use at www.ohiopandemicflu.gov/ and www.cdc.gov/flu/pandemic/pdf/pandemicfluQandA.pdf.

How will Ohio EPA help?

Ohio has thousands of publicly and privately owned water and wastewater treatment plants. Ohio EPA's Division of Surface Water (DSW) and Division of Drinking and Ground Waters (DDAGW) will strive to provide technical assistance, assist with communications, and support facilities to the best of our ability.

Given the number and widespread geographic locations of plants in the state, and the nature of communicable diseases, Ohio EPA will be unable to provide on-site assistance during a statewide emergency such as pandemic influenza. However, Ohio EPA has identified employees who can provide technical assistance through phone, e-mail and Internet services. In addition, DDAGW will be tracking and reporting on the status of all community public water systems. If you need assistance from Ohio EPA, please contact:

Central District Office - (614) 728-3778
Northeast District Office - (330) 963-1200
Northwest District Office - (419) 352-8461
Southeast District Office - (740) 385-8501
Southwest District Office - (937) 285-6357

Central Office
Division of Surface Water
(614) 644-2001
Division of Drinking and Ground Waters
(614) 644-2752

**For spills/discharge emergencies,
please call Ohio EPA's spill hotline at 1-800-282-9378**