



COMMUNICATING RISK

Pandemic Flu Preparedness



Introduction

During an influenza (flu) pandemic, information is likely to be uncertain and changeable as government officials and health professionals work to understand and control the outbreak. Communicating the risk of a flu pandemic in advance of it happening is a vital part of the preparedness effort. The following guidelines are given to help organizations think about how they will communicate this risk to staff members and their families, clients, partners and the broader public.





Communicating risk in a public health emergency

The goals of communication during a public health emergency, such as a flu pandemic, are to: raise awareness of the health risks; enable people to make responsible decisions to protect their health; and to encourage appropriate public participation and action that will help control and end the outbreak.

Advance contingency planning: Integrating communications

Informing your audience(s) about potential health risks is most effective when communication is integrated into contingency planning. Plans should be made in anticipation of potential emergencies, when partnerships, organizational structures and lines of communication can be established and tested in advance.

Pandemic planning in Canada

Communication is a key part of the Government of Canada's planning for a flu pandemic. The Public Health Agency of Canada is the lead on national pandemic communications and has adopted a strategic risk communications approach to prepare the population for the next flu pandemic.





Risk communications approach

Risk communication describes the dissemination or exchange of information about risks or hazards, possible effects, and practices to mitigate the risks. It is based on the assumption that the public has the right to know about actual and potential risks in order to make informed choices about how to deal with them. The goal of risk communication in health is to raise awareness, create a rational understanding of the risk, and induce behaviour that will contain the threat and help reduce public harm. One of its objectives is to encourage, or tap into, public resilience and the adoption of appropriate mitigating actions.

Risk communication practices include media outreach and public engagement through the mass media, public meetings, information sessions, intra- and inter-organizational networks, and means of communication (e.g. newsletter).

Accounting for psycho-social responses

Public health emergencies, such as disease outbreaks, frequently trigger uncertainty, confusion, concern, feelings of anxiety, anger, fear, and a sense of urgency. Effective communication must account for the psychological, social, cultural and physical aspects of risk and their effects.

Key factors for effective risk communication

Accessibility: Communicate clearly, concisely, with compassion and human appeal, in a respectful, adult tone. Use short sentences and everyday language. Define new or uncommon words. Be careful when quoting numbers – they are easily misinterpreted and misunderstood. Use graphics and visual aids, easy-to-read fonts, and leave lots of white space in written material.



Accuracy: Communicate information that is as accurate as possible in the circumstances. Refer to credible sources for situation updates.

Action: Help people to help themselves. Provide practical information with clear and consistent directions. Empower people to cope in an emergency.

Appropriateness: Respect the diversity and capabilities of your audience. Address them in an inclusive, representative and fair way.


Credibility: Refer to credible sources for situation updates. Cite these sources to strengthen your messages. In the case of a flu pandemic, refer to the World Health Organization, Public Health Agency of Canada, and your provincial, territorial, or local public health department for information.

Consistency: Follow the lead of federal, provincial/territorial and local public health officials for situation updates. Consistent and coordinated communications help build public trust in the information being disseminated.

Listen to concerns: Use communication channels that encourage listening, feedback and participation. Pay heed to the fears and concerns of your staff members and clients and respond to them in a respectful way.

Regularity: Repeat key messages to keep the issue visible, to make required actions more memorable, and to give them credibility through repetition.

Respond to rumours, misinformation and inaccuracies: Correct misinformation and quell rumour in a direct yet respectful way.



Role of the media: Accept the media as a legitimate partner in effective emergency communications; plan media outreach carefully and thoroughly; develop media relations; and meet the functional needs of the media.

Partnerships: Develop emergency preparedness planning in a collaborative and inclusive way. Build cross-sectoral partnerships.

Planning: Plan thoroughly and carefully. Establish clear lines of communication (internal and external) between organizational leaders, communicators, and partners. Test the lines of communication periodically.

Psycho-social: Acknowledge the anxiety, distress and grief that people may experience during a major public health emergency, such as a flu pandemic.

Timeliness: Present information in a timely way. Acknowledge the state of knowledge at that time and advise that updates will follow.

Transparency: Provide information that is candid, complete and factually accurate according to what is known. Don't over-reassure. Publicly acknowledge information gaps and that information may change as the situation develops.

Trust: Be truthful, honest, frank and open. This will help to build, maintain or restore trust. Practices that help to build trust include: early warnings; credible evidence-based advice and analysis; information that enables people to make balanced choices and decisions; acknowledging uncertainty and avoiding overconfident assessments; and respecting public fears and concerns.



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For **more information**, go to www.pandemic.cpha.ca or call **1-800-454-8302**.

A message from the Canadian Public Health Association.