

Plan for bird flu, retailers warned

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Few Canadian retailers are prepared for a pandemic, such as the avian flu, despite growing evidence that the deadly virus poses a serious threat, a retail-conference audience has heard.

"When I travel across the country, the sense I get is, 'Gosh, we haven't done much about this,'" said Derek Nighbor, the Retail Council of Canada's vice-president of national affairs. "This is not the average seasonal flu, where a few people may be off for a few days," Nighbor said at the council's annual conference in Toronto yesterday. "This is a serious illness that will spread rapidly."

So far, the so-called bird flu has been transmitted only in Asia and eastern Europe, and when a human comes into contact with an infected bird. But it may be only a matter of time for new locations and a jump from human to human.

Some task forces studying this issue have predicted that as many as third of employees would not report to work once the flu struck. They might be home ill, or caring for sick family members or afraid to go out in public for fear of contracting the illness, said Kirsten Lopes, a lawyer with Ogilvey Renault.

Employers need to have contingency plans that include everything from cross-training key personnel to teaching them better hygiene, Lopes said. That can include such things as showing employees how to cough into handkerchiefs and then safely dispose of them, she said.

"Over the past few years, more companies have been putting into place emergency policies and training their staff. But a lot more work remains to be done," Lopes said. Dawn Dickinson, manager of corporate risk for Hudson's Bay Co., said few insurance policies cover what's considered a foreseeable loss of this type. Unlike a flood, fire or terrorist attack, she added, a pandemic attacks your workforce.