

### Future Pandemic Preparedness: What Employers Need to Know

The COVID-19 pandemic reshaped how organizations think about emergency preparedness. But as businesses return to “normal,” experts urge employers not to let pandemic fatigue erode hard-earned lessons. Dr. Lisa Koonin, a leading public health expert and founder of [Health Preparedness Partners](#), shared critical insights for businesses in a recent [webinar on future pandemic preparedness](#).

#### Emerging Health Threats: Stay Alert

The past few years have shown us that emergencies can arise suddenly, disrupting businesses and communities in unexpected ways. Recently there has been an acceleration in infectious disease outbreaks and climate-related/natural disaster emergencies. As new threats emerge, companies must rethink their preparedness strategies to respond swiftly and effectively. While the threat of COVID-19 has diminished and is no longer disrupting business operations, continuing waves of this illness remain a concern. In addition, several new and reemerging health threats are on the horizon:

- [Avian Influenza](#) (H5N1): A highly pathogenic bird flu has spread among wild birds, poultry, and—more recently—dairy cows across the U.S. While human cases are rare, the virus is evolving. A recent U.S. case with no known animal exposure raises concerns about potential person-to-person transmission. Although there have not been any new human cases of bird flu in a few months, the [virus is still circulating](#) among wild birds in the US, and occasionally affecting dairy cattle and domestic flocks. CDC has characterized the [current risk](#) to the general U.S. population as low and is staying vigilant to detect any changes in the circulating viruses.
- [Mpox](#) (Clade I): This more contagious and potentially more severe variant has emerged in Central Africa. Although there had been only 5 confirmed cases of clade I mpox in the United States in people who had recently traveled to affected areas in Central and Eastern Africa, businesses with international travelers should [monitor updates](#).

- [Mosquito-borne Viruses](#): Rising temperatures and longer mosquito seasons are driving an uptick in diseases like [West Nile virus](#), [Eastern Equine Encephalitis](#) (EEE), and [Dengue](#). These may not spark pandemics but can cause serious illness, with the greatest threat being to [outdoor workers](#).
- [Measles](#): U.S. measles resurgence is real and intensifying. The U.S. is currently experiencing its worst measles outbreak in over 25 years, with over 1,200 confirmed cases across 39 states and jurisdictions—marking the highest annual tally in three decades. Although this large outbreak is not classified as a pandemic, it has been disruptive to businesses, including increased healthcare expenses for infected employees, productivity losses from quarantines, and the burden of contact tracing and testing. Declining childhood vaccination rates—now below the 95% herd immunity threshold—are fueling community vulnerability.
- [Weather-related emergencies](#): Extreme weather events—including heatwaves, floods, and wildfires—are surging worldwide, causing risks to human health and to business continuity by damaging infrastructure, interrupting supply chains, increasing insurance costs, and causing significant productivity and revenue losses. This summer alone has brought scorching “heat domes” across Europe and North America, tragic flash floods in Texas killing more than 130 people, and massive wildfires in the Mediterranean forcing tens of thousands to evacuate.

## Risk Assessment and Planning

Different business types face different risks. Companies with outdoor workforces, agricultural operations, or global travel programs need tailored strategies. Dr. Koonin emphasizes:

- Assess workforce and location-specific risks: Monitor local, national, and global weather and health alerts via reliable sources such as local health departments, the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC), World Health Organization (WHO), the National Weather Service, and [ProMED](#).
- Update emergency and business continuity plans to incorporate health risks, not just physical disasters.
- Develop methods to rapidly communicate with your workforce about impending risks or threats. Train teams about your emergency plans and conduct drills regularly. A plan is only as good as your team’s ability to carry it out under pressure. Make sure each member of the team is aware of and comfortable executing their roles and responsibilities during a crisis.

## Practical Steps for Employers

1. Modernize Sick Leave Policies: Flexible policies that encourage ill employees to stay home can reduce workplace outbreaks.
2. Maintain Critical Supplies: Stockpile PPE, hand sanitizer, and other essentials so your response is ready on day one.

3. **Improve Indoor Air Quality:** Upgrade HVAC systems with high-efficiency filters (e.g., MERV-13) and ensure regular maintenance to reduce airborne disease transmission.
4. **Support High-Risk Employees:** Without asking about medical conditions, share accurate, vetted information on vaccines and protective measures.
5. **Communicate Frequently and Transparently:** In a crisis, daily updates may be necessary. Develop systems to communicate quickly with all employees, customers, and stakeholders—even after hours.

## Vaccines: An Important Way to Protect Health

CDC continues to recommend [annual flu shots](#) for everyone 6 months and older. In addition, vaccines for COVID-19, RSV, and pneumococcal disease are recommended for certain high-risk groups. Encourage employees to consult healthcare providers to determine which vaccines are appropriate.

## Strengthening Business Resilience

Recovery is just as important as response. Businesses should:

- Conduct after-action reviews and anonymous surveys to identify emergency response planning gaps.
- Update plans based on lessons learned from past health crises.
- Support mental health and resilience, recognizing that employees are whole people with complex needs.

## Final Thought: Don't Wait for the Next Crisis

Pandemics and other health emergencies are inevitable. The key is being ready—on day one. Whether it's an emerging virus, a natural disaster, or something we haven't seen before, having a flexible, well-practiced plan will help protect your people and operations. Dr. Koonin advises that relying on business continuity and emergency response plans that were used to navigate prior emergencies may not match the needs of a future event. Although it is not known what will cause the next emergency, increased self-sufficiency is needed. Organizations may need to rely heavily on their plans, stockpiles, personnel, and established local networks when facing future emergencies, rather than expecting significant external support.

“Organizations cannot afford to rely on outdated plans or wait until the next emergency to develop an approach. By taking steps now—identifying reliable information sources, updating and rehearsing response plans, and strengthening communication strategies—organizations will be better equipped to navigate future challenges. Now more than ever, self-sufficiency is essential. The actions taken today will determine how well organizations withstand and respond to the next crisis.”

— Dr. Lisa Koonin

We would like to thank [Dr. Lisa Koonin](#) for her expertise and contributions to this case study.

Dr. Lisa Koonin is the founder of Health Preparedness Partners and a renowned expert in infectious disease and emergency preparedness, following a 30+ year career at the CDC. While at the CDC, she led the development of national preparedness plans and played key roles in responses to public health emergencies including COVID-19, Ebola, Zika, and multiple influenza pandemics. Dr. Koonin originated the CDC's private sector pandemic programs and has advised governments, healthcare systems, and global businesses on emergency planning. A family nurse practitioner and epidemiologist, she holds advanced degrees in nursing and public health, and serves as adjunct faculty at UNC Chapel Hill and Indiana University.

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