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Flu: Reducing the Risk of Exposure in the Workplace

A pandemic is a global disease outbreak. An influenza pandemic occurs when a new influenza virus emerges for which there is little or no immunity in the human population begins to cause serious illness and then spreads easily person-to-person worldwide. Planning for pandemic influenza is essential to minimize its impact.

The risk for infection can be reduced through a combination of actions. No single action provides complete protection, but a combined approach can help decrease the likelihood of transmission. To aid in pandemic contingency planning, the Occupational Safety and Health Administration (OSHA) has suggested the following steps that every employer can take to reduce the risk of exposure to pandemic influenza in the workplace:

- People who are sick with an influenza-like illness (ILI) (fever plus at least cough or sore throat and possibly other symptoms like runny nose, body aches, headaches, chills, fatigue, vomiting, and diarrhea) should stay home and keep away from others as much as possible, including avoiding travel, for at least 24 hours after fever is gone. (Fever should be gone without the use of fever-reducing medicine.)
- Encourage employees to wash their hands frequently with soap and water or with hand sanitizer if there is no soap or water available. Also, encourage employees to avoid touching their noses, mouths, and eyes.
- Encourage employees to cover their coughs and sneezes with a tissue, or to cough and sneeze into their upper sleeves if tissues are not available. Employees should wash their hands or use a hand sanitizer after they cough, sneeze, or blow their noses.
- Employees should avoid close contact with their coworkers and customers [maintain a separation of at least 6 ft (1.8m)]. They should avoid shaking hands and always wash their hands after contact with others. Even if employees wear gloves, they should wash their hands upon removal of the gloves in case their hand(s) became contaminated during the removal process.
- Provide customers and the public with tissues and trash receptacles and a place to wash or disinfect their hands.
- Keep work surfaces, telephones, computer equipment, other frequently touched surfaces, and office equipment clean. Be sure that any cleaner used is safe and will not harm employees or office equipment. Use only disinfectants registered by the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency (EPA), and follow all directions and safety precautions indicated on the label.
- Discourage employees from using other employees' phones, desks, offices, or other work tools and equipment.
- Minimize situations, such as in a meeting, where groups of people are crowded together. Use email, phones, and text messages to communicate with each other. When meetings are necessary, avoid close contact by keeping a separation of at least 6 ft (1.8 m), where possible, and assure that there is proper ventilation in the meeting room.

- Reduce or eliminate unnecessary social interactions, which can be very effective in controlling the spread of infectious diseases. Reconsider all situations that permit or require employees, customers, and visitors (including family members) to enter the workplace. Workplaces which permit family visitors on site should consider restricting/eliminating that option during an influenza pandemic. Worksites with onsite day care should consider in advance whether these facilities will remain open or will be closed, and the impact of such decisions on employees and the business.
- Promote healthy lifestyles, including vaccination for H1N1 and seasonal flu, good nutrition, exercise, and smoking cessation. A person's overall health impacts their body's immune system and can affect their ability to fight off, or recover from, an infectious disease.

More detailed planning information is available from OSHA in *Guidance on Preparing Workplaces for an Influenza Pandemic* (OSHA 3327-02N). Information is also available from the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services (DHHS) at PandemicFlu.Gov. The Center for Disease Control (CDC) released a planning guide for small businesses at <http://www.flu.gov/professional/business/smallbiz.html>.

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