



## Influenza in Non-Healthcare Workplaces: Answers to Commonly Asked Questions

### **What is Influenza?**

Influenza is caused by a virus and is commonly known as the “flu”. It can cause mild to severe illness or in some instances, death. Symptoms of the flu include fever, cough, sore throat, runny or stuffy nose, body aches, headache, chills and fatigue.

### **How is it spread?**

Infected people spread the flu virus to others through coughs and sneezes that spread germs to close contacts (people within 3 to 6 feet). Sometimes people may become infected by touching something – such as a surface or object – with flu viruses on it and then touching their mouth or nose. A person with the flu can spread germs from the day before they develop symptoms until several days after getting sick.

### **What is this year’s Influenza season going to be like?**

The severity of the influenza season cannot be predicted in advance, however every year there is an epidemic of influenza illnesses across the country. The size of the epidemic is highly dependant on whether the strains that have been placed in the vaccine match the strains that are circulating in the population this year. There will be three flu virus strains that will be included in a single dose of vaccine this year. The H1N1 (swine) influenza strain that was responsible for the worldwide pandemic in 2009 will be included in the seasonal vaccine this year. When the vaccine matches with circulating influenza strains it is 70% to 90% effective in preventing influenza infection

### **What should I do if I think I’ve been exposed to the flu?**

The people who are most likely to get the flu are household contacts and family members of others who have the flu, because they usually have close and prolonged contact with people while they are sick. If you have been exposed to others with the flu in a workplace situation, do the following:

- Pay attention to your own health for flu symptoms like fever, cough, and sore throat.
- Workers who have symptoms of flu are recommended to stay home and not come to work until at least 24 hours after their fever (temp 100 °F or greater) has ended without the use of fever-reducing medicine.
- If you are older than 65, your condition worsens, or have medical conditions that might place you at risk for serious complications of the flu, contact your doctor when you begin to feel sick. Your doctor may prescribe you medicine (antivirals) to treat the flu. Medical conditions that place you at higher risk are pregnancy and chronic conditions such as asthma, diabetes, heart disease, or immunosuppressing conditions.

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### **How can the flu be prevented in workplaces?**

- **Encourage employees to get vaccinated.** The regular seasonal flu vaccine should be given to all employees, as this is one of the most effective means of preventing illness. The seasonal vaccine this year will protect against the H1N1 flu virus that circulated in 2009 so only one vaccine is necessary to protect you.
- **Wash your hands often.** Use soap and water or an alcohol-based hand sanitizer. Wash your hands every time you eat, handle food, use the bathroom, cough or sneeze onto your hand, change a diaper, and when your hands look dirty.
- **Cover your cough.** When you cough or sneeze, cover your nose and mouth with your arm or sleeve, or with a tissue. If you use a tissue, throw it away, and then wash your hands. You should try to avoid coughing into your hands because this can spread germs to other people.
- **Stay home when you are sick.** Don't go to work, school or run errands—you will keep others from catching your illness. Expect sick employees to be out for about 3 to 5 days in most cases, even if antiviral drugs are used. Identify and exclude sick workers who are exhibiting signs and symptoms of influenza. Sick individuals should stay home for at least 24 hours after they no longer have a fever, without the use of fever-reducing medicine.
- **Avoid close contact.** Avoid close contact with people who are sick and make sure they have tissues to cover their sneezes and coughs. When you are sick, keep your distance from others to protect them from getting sick, too.
- **Keep the office clean.** Use cleaning agents that you normally use around the office and follow the directions on the label. Routine cleaning is enough although particular attention should be paid to frequently touched surfaces (railings, desk surfaces, doorknobs, light switches).

### **What should we do to ensure the continuity of operations?**

If you don't have a plan to ensure business operations continue under increased absenteeism due to influenza, begin developing one. The Department of Health and Human Services (HHS) and the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) have developed a checklist that businesses can use to plan for the impact of a severe influenza season on your employees and customers. This check list should do the following: establish policies to be implemented during a pandemic, allocate resources to protect your employees and customers during a pandemic, communicate to and educate your employees on influenza and your policies regarding sickness and leave time, coordinate with external organizations, and help your community during this time.

### **Additional Resources**

- Philadelphia Department of Public Health:  
<http://www.phila.gov/health/DiseaseControl/FightingFlu.html>
- U.S. Federal Government: [www.flu.gov/professional/business](http://www.flu.gov/professional/business)
- Pennsylvania Department of Health:  
[http://www.portal.state.pa.us/portal/server.pt/community/influenza\\_\(flu\)/14161/flu\\_reco mmendations\\_for\\_businesses/557940](http://www.portal.state.pa.us/portal/server.pt/community/influenza_(flu)/14161/flu_reco mmendations_for_businesses/557940)