

Flu Season's Back! Ready?

Fever? Cough? Achy all over? It's flu season again. Are you ready to help prevent the spread of infection in your workplace and among your employees?

What advice can you offer employees who are sick with the flu? Flu.gov, a U.S. Department of Health and Human Services website, recommends these reminders:

- Avoid contact with other people as much as possible to keep from spreading your illness. Remember that you might be sick for a week or longer. With seasonal flu, adults may be contagious from 1 day before they develop symptoms to up to 7 days after you get sick. Children can be contagious longer.
- With the exception of making trips to get medical care or for other necessities, stay home. This includes not going to work until at least 24 hours *after* your fever is gone.
- Always cover your coughs and sneezes with a tissue to avoid spreading infected droplets on others.

Preventing the Spread of Infection in the Workplace

How can your employees help prevent the spread of flu in their work areas?

Flu.gov points out that flu virus can survive for 24 to 48 hours or longer on hard surfaces and 8 to 12 hours on porous surfaces such as paper or cloth. Flu viruses can then be spread when a person touches a hard surface (such as a desk or doorknob) or an object (such as a keyboard, papers, or pen) where the virus has landed and then touches his or her eyes, nose, or mouth.

Routine cleaning of hard surfaces will help stop the virus from spreading in this way. Employees should be encouraged to clean surfaces and items that are frequently touched by different people, such as doorknobs, faucets, and telephones. They should wipe these surfaces with a household disinfectant, following the directions on the product label.

Flu Vaccinations

The Center for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) recommends a yearly flu shot as the first and most important step in protecting against flu viruses.

Encourage employees to get a flu shot. Consider posting notices around the workplace that inform employees about where in the community they can go for flu shots. Or put flu shot reminders into pay envelopes, in employee newsletters, and other communications with employees.

Sick Family Members

Should an employee with a sick family member stay home or come to work?

Flu.gov says an employee with an ill household member may go to work. But it is especially important that these employees monitor themselves for illness, and stay home if they begin to feel symptoms.

Returning to Work After the Flu

When employees who have had the flu return to work, remind them to:

- Continue to practice good respiratory etiquette and hand hygiene.
- Avoid close contact with people they know to be at increased risk of flu-related complications.

How to Minimize the Impact of Flu Season on Your Workplace

There's a lot you can do to prevent flu from invading your workplace, making your employees sick, increasing the risk of accidents, and creating havoc with work schedules. Here are some recommendations from Flu.gov.

Flu.gov, a U.S. Department of Health and Human Services website, recommends that businesses take the following steps to keep employees from getting sick with flu:

- **Promote vaccination.** Encourage all employees to get vaccinated for seasonal flu. Make sure your employees know where they and their family can get seasonal flu vaccination in the community. Find out about health providers, pharmacies or clinics that offer seasonal flu vaccinations in your community. Partner with a pharmacy or provider to get your employees vaccinated. Or, if possible, offer seasonal flu vaccination opportunities right at your workplace.
- **Educate employees to recognize the symptoms of flu.** Symptoms of flu include fever or chills and cough or sore throat. In addition, symptoms of flu can include runny nose, body aches, headache, tiredness, diarrhea, or vomiting. Workers who have flu-like symptoms should be asked to go home. Continue to advise workers to check for any signs of illness before coming to work each day.

- **Encourage hand cleanliness** by providing education and reminders about the importance of frequent hand washing. Make sure all employees have easy access to running water and soap or alcohol-based hand cleaners.
- **Encourage "respiratory etiquette"** by providing education and reminders about covering coughs and sneezes with tissues, and easy access to tissues and trash cans.
- **Promote routine cleaning of surfaces and items that are more likely to have frequent hand contact.** Provide employees with cleaning agents.
- **Prepare for employees to stay home from work and extend the time sick employees stay home to at least 7 days.** People who are still sick after 7 days should continue to stay home until at least 24 hours after symptoms have gone away, even if they feel better sooner. Employees may stay home because they are sick, are at higher risk for complications, need to care for sick household members, or because schools have been dismissed or childcare centers have closed and they need to care for their children. Review sick-leave policies and consider making them flexible and consistent with public health recommendations.