

## Keeping your workforce healthy

# Welcome to the 2011-2012 Flu Season: Is your business ready?

In an influenza outbreak, you play a key role in protecting your employees' health and safety.

The workplace is one place where everyone can help stop the spread of the flu. The actions you take "locally" can help limit the impact of the illness on the economy and society as a whole. Pandemics, like the viruses that cause them, are unpredictable and can occur at any time. As with any potential catastrophe, it's essential to have a contingency plan. We can't afford to let our guard down and let this flu season turn into another pandemic.

So, how can you be sure you're prepared in the event of a serious outbreak? We have 3 recommendations that will help your employees stay healthy and keep your business going.

### Preparation

1. Develop an emergency action plan. The goal is to protect your employees while keeping interruptions to your business to a minimum. Be sure the plan takes care of managing and controlling operations and communications in case your headquarters and key people become inaccessible. Appoint a core team to coordinate the emergency response. If you have many locations, you should have coordinators at each facility. Make sure that you can maintain your core business operations over an extended period of time — you might have only a minimal workforce. Plan to make vaccines available to your employees.
2. Review and update your policies and procedures. At the very least, check your employee communications, telecommuting and leave, and travel policies.

Communications	Emergency
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Encourage your employees to take steps to avoid the flu</li> <li>• Encourage them to act responsibly if they or their family members contract the flu</li> <li>• Send the message that the company is committed to their health and well-being</li> <li>• Communicate clearly, using Q&amp;As, to make it easier for employees to choose what is best for themselves, their families, co-workers and communities</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Determine what business functions are essential and make sure people are cross-trained to replace absentees</li> <li>• Update contact and emergency information for all employees</li> <li>• Make sure you can be reached — by website, multiple email addresses, telephone and fax</li> <li>• Make sure employees can access the office remotely if necessary</li> </ul>

Leave	Travel
<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Encourage sick or exposed workers to stay at home</li><li>• Check your leave policies so that you're able to allow extended leaves and continuation of benefits and pay</li><li>• If you offer paid time off (PTO) programs, consider adding days, or changing the structure of the plan, so that employees don't come to work sick in an effort to save vacation days</li></ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Consider using webinars and web seminars for meetings</li><li>• Don't ask sick employees to travel; those who aren't sick may resist assignments requiring travel in areas perceived to be at greater risk for the flu virus</li><li>• Consider making travel kits available to your business travelers. These kits include a mask, hand sanitizer, and flu-prevention tips</li><li>• Provide information on what steps to take if they are exposed to or contract the flu while traveling abroad; in some countries, travelers face quarantine if they or other passengers exhibit fever or flu-like symptoms</li><li>• Talk to your health care vendor about coverage outside the United States during a flu outbreak, and know the different coverages for pandemics and non-pandemics</li></ul>

3. Educate and prepare your employees. It all starts with common sense health and hygiene. Educate employees on how to prevent the spread of germs:

- a. Cover your nose and mouth with a tissue or your sleeve when you cough or sneeze. Throw the tissue in the trash after you use it.
- b. Wash your hands often with soap and water. If soap and water are not available, use an alcohol-based hand rub.
- c. Avoid touching your eyes, nose and mouth. Germs spread this way.
- d. Try to avoid close contact with sick people. If you are sick, limit contact with others as much as possible to keep from infecting them.
- e. If you are sick with flu-like symptoms, CDC recommends that you stay home for at least 24 hours after your fever is gone except to get medical care or for other necessities. (Your fever should be gone without the use of a fever-reducing medicine.)

### 2011-2012 flu vaccines

The most important thing you can do for yourself, your company, your employees and coworkers, family, and friends — and even for strangers — is to get the flu shot this fall and make it available to employees.

The influenza vaccination recommendation this year is simple: everyone 6 months old and up should receive the influenza vaccine.

The flu is a serious disease that can lead to hospitalization and sometimes even death. Anyone can get sick from the flu. For more information about influenza and how to protect yourself, your family, and your employees, visit [www.flu.gov](http://www.flu.gov).

## Facts about the flu

### The flu:

- Is a contagious respiratory illness caused by influenza viruses that infect the nose, throat, and lungs
- Is spread by droplets made when people with flu cough, sneeze or talk
- Can be passed on to someone else (beginning a day before symptoms develop), as well as up to 5 – 7 days after becoming sick
- Poses a greater risk to older people, young children, pregnant women and people with certain health conditions (such as asthma, diabetes, or heart disease), and persons who live in facilities like nursing or group homes
- Can cause mild to severe illness, and at times can lead to death
- Can cost employers as much as \$1,494 per employee in lost time
- Can best be prevented by getting a flu vaccine each year – it's crucial for employers to make flu shots available to employees, through vaccination programs or coverage under your health plan

There are two types of flu vaccines:

1. "Flu shots" — These inactivated vaccines (containing killed virus) are given with a needle. There are three flu shots being produced for the United States market in the 2011-2012 seasons.
  - a. The regular seasonal flu shot is "intramuscular." It is injected into muscle (usually in the upper arm). It has been used for decades and is approved for those 6 months of age and older, including healthy people, people with chronic medical conditions and pregnant women. Regular flu shots make up the bulk of the vaccine supply produced for the United States.
  - b. For the first time, there's an intradermal vaccine for people 18 to 64 years of age. This is injected with a needle into the "dermis" or skin. This vaccine is available for the 2011-2012 season. (There's no difference in effectiveness between this and the intramuscular shot.)
  - c. There is a hi-dose vaccine for people 65 and older. This is also intramuscular. This vaccine was first made available during the 2010-2011 season.
2. The nasal-spray flu vaccine is a vaccine made with live, weakened flu viruses (sometimes called LAIV for "Live Attenuated Influenza Vaccine"). It's given as a nasal spray (primarily among children, to avoid giving them injections). The viruses in the nasal spray vaccine do not cause the flu. LAIV is approved for use in healthy\* people 2 to 49 years of age who are not pregnant.

About two weeks after vaccination, antibodies develop that protect against influenza virus infection. Flu vaccines will not protect against flu-like illnesses caused by non-influenza viruses.

The 2011-2012 vaccine will protect against:

- Influenza A H3N2 virus
- Influenza B virus
- H1N1 virus

These three viruses are expected to be the most common this year; they're the same strains as those in last year's vaccines. However, the CDC has always recommended that people get vaccinated every year for optimal protection. The immunity you acquired from last season's vaccine won't be as strong, and may not be enough to prevent infection this season.

If one of your employees does get the flu and hasn't been vaccinated, vaccination is still useful. Remember, you can't build up a natural resistance to the flu because it keeps changing. You can get it more than once a season. The flu season generally runs from October to May, so flu vaccination during the winter months can still provide protective benefits for patients who have not yet received the vaccine.

## Summary

Influenza is the sixth leading cause of death among adults in the United States. Each year, influenza kills an average of 36,000 Americans and causes more deaths than all other vaccine-preventable diseases combined.

As an employer, you have to strike a delicate balance when dealing with your employees' health, wellness, and freedom of choice. Health officials encourage you to prepare for the upcoming flu season and a potential worst-case scenario. As you review your current policies, procedures, and health care coverage, remember that all action items must comply with HIPAA, FMLA, ADA, and other laws.

Finally, without appropriate communication that helps your employees understand the issues and protect themselves and others from infection, your business needs could be left to chance.

## About the Author:

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