



Employee Safety

Flu Season: Protecting Workforce Health and Stopping Presenteeism

Holly B. Martin | Aug 22, 2017

What You Need to Know

The most important thing employers can do to prepare for flu season is to encourage workers and their families to get a flu shot.

Employees who have flu symptoms should be encouraged to stay at home—and should always cover their mouths with their sleeves, a handkerchief or tissue—and wash their hands a lot throughout the day.

Safety managers should also emphasize good health habits to ward off disease, such as eating nutrient-rich foods, staying hydrated and getting adequate rest.

One key way to help reduce the cost and harm of influenza is to host a free flu shot clinic at work.

With flu season outbreaks known to occur as early as October, it is time to prepare to take action to ensure the health of your employees and productivity of your workplace.

As the year draws to a close, employers and safety managers typically begin to dread winter flu season—and the costs and operational disruptions it can bring.

According to the *Bureau of Labor Statistics* (BLS), statistical spikes in worker absences from December through March are related to seasonal illnesses, such as influenza. As a result of these absences, a 2015 *study* compiled by Smart Asset (that examined CDC data and the Google Flu Trends database) showed that national productivity losses could be as high as \$10 billion each year, not including medical costs.

Getting a Flu Shot During Flu Season

To combat these negatives, Glenn Taylor, assistant regional administrator for compliance assistance programs for OSHA region 7, stresses that the most important thing employers can do to prepare for flu season is to encourage workers—and their family members—to get vaccinated each year.

“Vaccination has been shown to be the best way to both protect workers and their families,” he says.

“Even if workers themselves do not get sick, those with a household full of sick people are going to have increased absenteeism from the workplace.”

The Centers for Disease Control advise vaccinations begin happening as soon as they are available in the fall, as outbreaks have been known to occur as early as October in a given year—though peak occurrences tend to be in January and after.

“Since it takes about two weeks after vaccination for antibodies to develop in the body that protect against influenza virus infection, it is best that people get vaccinated so they are protected before influenza begins spreading in their community,” notes the CDC in its *article* “Key Facts About Seasonal Flu Vaccine.”

Watching for Flu Symptoms

According to Taylor, the second most important thing employers can do is to encourage workers to stay home if they've got symptoms associated with flu, such as a temperature, severe body aches and dry cough—which may be different than symptoms of a cold. If an employee is running a temperature of 100 degrees or higher, Taylor advises the employee to wait until he or she is clear for 24 hours without fever-reducing medication before returning to work.

Influenza is caused by a *contagious virus*. It can spread from person to person, infecting entire work groups. But sometimes employees do not yet realize they are sick, and they may unknowingly pass the virus on to others through air from their lungs or microscopic moisture droplets from their nose or mouth.

“To prevent spread of the flu, we want employees to use cough and sneeze etiquette—either using a tissue or coughing and sneezing into the upper part of their sleeve—because you don't want to aerosolize droplets where others can inhale them,” Taylor says. “This is critical especially if they're in a work environment with a number of people co-located fairly densely.”

Proper hand hygiene also is critical to preventing the spread of disease. “Door handles, HMI screens, copy machines—surfaces people commonly come into contact with at work—are sources, or what we call ‘vectors,’ which can actually pass on infectious particles,” he says.

For this reason, safety managers should strongly encourage frequent hand washing, as well as regular cleaning and periodic disinfection of commonly touched work surfaces according to manufacturer's guidelines, Taylor says.

Absenteeism and “Presenteeism”

While employers should emphasize the importance of employees staying home when they are sick, employees in the early stages of coming down with the flu may not yet realize they have it. Or, they may feel they can't afford to stay home financially, so they drag themselves in to work. This can result in “presenteeism,” where the worker is not absent, but not really present, either.

In cases like this, the employee may not be paying close attention to work, which could lead to serious safety issues.

“It’s one thing to be sitting in an office doing paperwork and having your mind wander, but it’s quite another for someone operating critical machinery to have their mind wander and be injured as a result, or cause a major breakdown of the system or equipment,” says Glenn Taylor, assistant regional administrator for compliance assistance programs for OSHA region 7.

“That is a risky situation potentially, and the importance of vigilance can’t be overstated if the employee works at the point of operation,” Taylor says. “That’s where engineering controls for machine guarding are important, so that the worker’s safety is not just dependent on their behavior to protect him or herself when they’re not feeling 100 percent.”

Avoiding Flu Complications

By proactively educating workers on how flu is contracted, what they can do to prevent or minimize their exposure, and the conditions that might put them at higher risk, managers can help prevent serious complications in their workers that could lead to further loss of productivity. Heart problems, asthma and other breathing issues, or advanced age, can make more severe symptoms likely. At the same time, managers can emphasize the need for good health habits to ward off disease.

“It’s always important to maintain good general health by getting adequate rest, fluid intake and good nutrition, but even very healthy people can contract flu,” Taylor says. “But good resistance in terms of overall health of the individual would help if a person does contract the flu, to mitigate or minimize the complications and help them recover faster.”

Other strategies for lessening the effects of flu include prescription drugs such as Tamiflu. Though it doesn’t prevent the infection, if utilized in the first 24-48 hours that a person is sick, Tamiflu could minimize the severity of the symptoms and reduce the overall duration, Taylor says.

“Vaccination has been shown to be the best way to both protect workers and their families,” he says. “Even if workers themselves do not get sick, those with a household full of sick people are going to have increased absenteeism from the workplace.”

Glenn Taylor

Assistant Regional Administrator, OSHA

Offer Free Flu Shots at Work

Taylor suggests that employers might host a flu vaccine clinic, inviting the local health department or pharmacies in to vaccinate their employees in the workplace. Such a clinic could also serve as a distribution center for educational material about ways to prevent or reduce exposure to flu, as well as information on company sick leave policies.

Employers and safety managers should also plan ahead to ensure that business processes can be maintained if and when key employees are absent due to the flu, Taylor says.

“Preparedness planning for continuity of operations needs to be addressed, especially for facilities that have ongoing critical processes,” he says. “This certainly should be included in their overall emergency operations plan.”

What is your business doing to prepare for flu season? Let us know in the comments below.

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