



Facility Safety

Is Your Workplace Prepared for Flu Season?

Gillian Scott | Sep 27, 2018

What You Need to Know

Addressing the spread of germs is a critical step in preventing workplace illnesses like the flu. Flu shots help prevent flu infections, reduce the severity of illness if someone does get sick anyway and help stop the spread of the virus to others.

Sometimes staying home is the most helpful thing a sick employee can do.

Advance planning can help facilities prepare for the worst-case scenario: a flu pandemic.

Just like spring, summer, winter and fall, flu season rolls around every year like clockwork. But instead of spring flowers or autumn leaves, flu season brings with it increased absenteeism and lost work time. You can't prevent its arrival, but developing a flu prevention program can prepare your facility and help keep your employees healthy.

The *Centers for Disease Control and Prevention* says flu season typically occurs in the U.S. in the fall and winter months, peaking between December and February. According to MarketWatch, the flu costs the U.S. an average of \$7 billion a year in sick days and lost productivity. So what can you do to prevent some of those losses?

Helping Stop the Spread of Germs

Step one in preventing the flu from devastating your facility is helping your employees to stay healthy. Taking flu precautions in the workplace means stopping the spread of germs.

Anaya Green, a facial category manager for Kimberly-Clark, says simple steps like making sure employees have access to tissues and **hand sanitizer stations** can make a big difference.

"Being proactive is critical," Green says. "A sneeze can send 100,000 germs across a distance of 5 to 32 feet. And droplets that remain airborne can travel through ventilation systems."

That means encouraging employees to cover their mouths and noses when they sneeze or cough is particularly important. If tissues aren't within reach, employees can sneeze or cough into their elbows.

Good hand hygiene—vigorous hand-washing or the use of hand sanitizer—can eliminate germs.

Keeping common *surfaces clean and disinfected* is another key tactic for taking flu precautions in the workplace. The *CDC recommends* that employers routinely clean frequently touched objects and surfaces.

“There are so many surfaces that are contaminated,” Green says. Bathroom sink faucets, door handles, water fountains and even elevator buttons can all be covered in germs. “Germs can live up to 8 to 12 hours on porous surfaces and up to 48 hours on nonporous surfaces,” she says.

Employers can help prevent the spread of germs by making sure facilities have adequate cleaning supplies to disinfect surfaces, as well as tissues, soap, paper towels, hand sanitizer and disposable wipes, says the CDC.

It's Not Just the Flu

The flu is not the only illness that can disrupt business. From the common cold to stomach bugs, a variety of viruses can pass from employee to employee and lead to absenteeism. That means communication about healthy work practices shouldn't be taking place only during flu season.

Anaya Green, a facial category manager for Kimberly-Clark, says cold and flu season has an overall societal cost of more than \$11 billion.

Just like with the flu, the first line of defense against many communicable illnesses is basic: Wash your hands, cover your mouth when you sneeze or cough, and stay home when you're sick.

Andreas Klotz, senior technical product manager at Deb Group, an away-from-home skin care company, writes in *a blog post* that prevention awareness signs and posters can help encourage employees to practice good hygiene.

“By placing infographics and tip-filled posters on how to correctly wash hands, how much soap to use and other ways to stay healthy, [you can] help keep employees focused on the importance of hand hygiene at work,” he writes. “These posters should be placed at critical hand-washing areas such as restrooms, kitchens and high-traffic areas like hallways and lobbies.

Fighting Flu Season Beyond the Workplace

Workers can also be exposed to the flu at home or in public places like the supermarket.

“Anytime you have human activity, you have the possibility of human contamination,” says Green.

So developing a flu prevention program means not only fighting germs in your facility, but also educating employees about steps they can take to stay healthy no matter where they are. One big step in the right direction is encouraging everyone to get a flu shot.

According to the *Occupational Safety and Health Administration*, flu shots do more than help prevent

infections. They also decrease the severity of illness if people do get the flu anyway, and they prevent the spread of the flu among co-workers, family members and others.

The **CDC** recommends that everyone 6 months of age and older get an annual flu shot, preferably by the end of October each year. Even if someone misses that target, the CDC says the vaccine can still be beneficial if people get it by the end of January.

Dealing with Absenteeism from Flu Season: When to Stay Home

The flu shot is just one part of staying healthy, though. In addition to keeping their hands clean and practicing good “cough etiquette,” the **CDC also recommends** people get plenty of sleep, exercise, eat well and drink enough water.

The agency suggests that people avoid close contact with those who are sick. Similarly, the CDC also says people who are sick should avoid close contact with others—and yes, this may mean staying home from work to avoid spreading the flu.

“While sick workers may think they are doing the right thing by ‘toughing it out’ and coming into work when they feel ill, they are only likely to spread their illness, potentially further interrupting optimum business operations,” relays Andrew Challenger, vice president of global outplacement consultancy Challenger, Gray & Christmas Inc., *in an EHS Today* article. “Whether it is motivated by job security or a desire to continue making a contribution in an overburdened workplace, presenteeism, as it has come to be called, should be strongly discouraged by employers.”

What’s “presenteeism”? Learn all about it in “Flu Season: Protecting Workforce Health and Stopping Presenteeism.”

OSHA suggests employers create a sick leave plan that encourages ill employees to stay home when they are ill, so they don’t infect others. Other suggestions include reviewing which employees might be able to work remotely and whether some meetings can take place via teleconference.

To help keep work moving despite absences, Challenger suggests employers can cross-train employees in tasks necessary to keep a department functioning.

“This will not only help prevent any lapses in work to customers and clients, but will also give employees the opportunity to increase their skill sets,” he says.

“Anytime you have human activity, you have the possibility of human contamination.”

Anaya Green

Facial Category Manager, Kimberly-Clark

What About Pandemics?

It’s been 100 years since the **1918 outbreak** of the Spanish flu infected more than 500 million and killed more than 50 million worldwide.

Since that time, the use of both flu vaccines and antibiotics to treat secondary infections has become commonplace. But pandemics still occur. “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,” **says OSHA**. In the U.S., the 2009 pandemic flu infected approximately 61 million people before it was over, the CDC estimates, with

274,304 hospitalizations, and 12,469 deaths.

In the event of an influenza pandemic, “employers will likely experience employee absences, changes in patterns of commerce and interrupted supply and delivery schedules,” OSHA writes in its ***influenza pandemic planning guide***.

The guide includes steps for developing a disaster plan, as well as tips on how workplaces can protect their employees and maintain operations during a pandemic.

“Companies that provide critical infrastructure services, such as power and telecommunications ... have a special responsibility to plan for continued operation in a crisis and should plan accordingly,” the guide states. “As with any catastrophe, having a contingency plan is essential.”

How is your plant preparing for flu season? Share your stories.

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