

Preventing the Spread of Flu in the Workplace

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The global threat of an avian flu pandemic since the late 1990s has prompted employers and communities during recent years to increase their awareness and preparedness for the social impact of a full blown influenza pandemic – a flu outbreak that spreads in large regions throughout the world and infects large portions of the human population. First identified in April 2009, the H1N1 (swine) flu has spread rapidly around the world and was declared a pandemic in June 2009 by the World Health Organization.

While there is no need to panic, parents should definitely consider having their children (6 months and older) vaccinated as soon as the H1N1 vaccination is available (expected in mid-to-late October and may be a two-tiered vaccination with a second shot administered 21 days or so after the first). The initial target groups for the vaccine are:

- Children 6 months through adults age 24
- Pregnant women
- Healthcare and emergency service personnel
- People with household contact of children under 6 months of age
- Adults ages 25 through 64 who are at higher risk due to chronic health disorders or compromised immune systems

After the initial focus, the vaccine is expected to be offered to healthy adults. Influenza immunizations will be recommended but not mandated for school students, and written permission will be required before children are immunized in the schools. Specifics will be announced by the Alabama Department of Public Health at a later date.

Preventing the spread of flu, regardless of the strain, can be minimized through the use of hygiene practices and good habits. To reduce the incidence of the spread of viruses and germs in the workplace, home and community the following practices should be followed:

- Wash hands often with soap and water and for at least 20 seconds. Employers should make sure that antibacterial soaps and methods for drying hands are readily available in the workplace and community accessible areas.
- Alcohol based hand sanitizer can be used when soap and water are unavailable. Employers should provide small containers for employees working outside office buildings.
- Coughs and sneezes should be covered with tissues. The

upper arm or sleeve can be used if tissue not available. Hands should be washed or sanitized afterwards. No-touch trash receptacles should be available to dispose of hand towels and tissues.

- Increase your contact from someone who is coughing or sneezing to at least 6 feet. If possible, shaking hands should be avoided.
- Avoid touching your eyes, mouth or nose with unclean hands. These are the areas most prone to picking up germs from other surfaces.
- Workplace areas should make supplies such as water, Clorox, or alcohol products available to employees use during the workday. Phones, desks, keyboards, doorknobs, tools and equipment can easily become contaminated surfaces.
- Persons who wear gloves or other personal protective equipment (PPE) during the workday should carefully wash hands after the removal of the equipment. PPE should be maintained and cleaned daily.
- Employers should minimize the number of group meetings, particularly if large number of employees and their family members are sick. Flexibility in working arrangements should be considered.
- Sick employees should stay home and not return to work until free of fever without the aid of any medication for at least 24 hours.

That final bullet point is worth reiterating: if you are sick – **STAY HOME!** Of course, you can expose others to the virus 24 to 48 hours before exhibiting symptoms; however, if you do become sick, **STAY HOME. Do not return to work until you've been fever free (without the aid of any medication) for 24 hours.**

Because the virus spreads so quickly, many if not all of your family members may be sick within a short time frame. Your family may want to consider stocking up on food and liquids in advance including basic household products that are used on a weekly basis. Consideration should also be given to obtaining an extra supply of any regular prescription drugs used by family members. For other information regarding emergency preparedness for pandemic influenza see the Alabama Department of Public Health link at www.adph.org/pandemicflu.

For current information and public health updates on H1N1, visit www.adph.org/h1n1flu or www.cdc.gov/h1n1flu. ■