

Guidance for Businesses and Employers for Planning and Responses to the 2009 - 2010 Influenza Season

September 1, 2009

INTRODUCTION

This document provides brief guidance to help businesses and employers decrease the spread of flu in the workplace during the 2009-2010 influenza season. This document has three sections: 1) recommendations for updating business influenza plans and leave policies, 2) recommended actions with conditions in Harris County being of similar severity to spring 2009 and 3) recommended actions if public health officials find that the flu starts causing more severe impact than was seen in spring 2009. *Public health officials will consider several factors when determining impact, such as illness severity, disease spread, health care system capacity, etc.*

Public health officials currently recommend that people with influenza-like illness remain at home until at least 24 hours after they are free of fever (100° F or greater), or signs of a fever, without the use of fever-reducing medications. **All businesses and employers should plan now to allow and encourage sick employees to stay home without fear of losing their jobs. Public health officials recommend this strategy for all levels of severity.** Additional detailed information can be found in the following two Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) documents:

- CDC Guidance for Businesses and Employers to Plan and Respond to 2010 Influenza Season: <http://www.flu.gov/plan/workplaceplanning/guidance.html>.)
- Preparing for the Flu: A Communication Toolkit for Businesses and Employers: <http://www.flu.gov/plan/workplaceplanning/toolkit.html>

For more general information on novel H1N1 influenza, please visit www.hcphe.org, www.cdc.gov, or www.flu.gov.

SECTION 1: KEY PLANNING CONSIDERATIONS FOR BUSINESSES AND EMPLOYERS

- Know your normal seasonal absenteeism rates and how to monitor for unusual increases in absenteeism through the fall and winter.
- Develop flexible leave policies that:
 - allow employees to stay home when ill without losing their jobs or having to provide a doctor's note.
 - allow employees to stay home, without losing their jobs or having to provide a doctor's note, to care for sick family members. Be aware that more employees may need to stay home to care for ill children or other ill family members than is usual.
 - allow employees to stay home, without losing their jobs, to care for children if schools or child care programs dismiss students. Strongly recommend that parents not bring their children with them to work in case of school or childcare program dismissals.
- When possible, establish policies such as flexible worksites or work hours to increase physical distance among employees. Insure you have the information technology and infrastructure needed to support multiple staff who may work from home.
- Share your policy with company contractors or temporary employees.
- Establish plans to continue your essential functions in case you experience higher than usual absenteeism.
- Encourage employees who perform essential functions and who have children to plan for contingencies in the event of school dismissals.
- Share your influenza pandemic plan with employees and explain what human resources policies, workplace and leave flexibilities, and pay and benefits will be available to them.

SECTION 2: ACTIONS BUSINESSES AND EMPLOYERS SHOULD IMPLEMENT NOW

Under conditions with similar severity as in spring 2009

Sick persons should stay home

- Remind employees to: 1) be alert for signs of fever and other influenza symptoms before reporting to work each day and 2) notify their supervisor and stay home if they are ill.
- Employees with flu-like illness should stay home for at least 24 hours after they no longer have a fever, or signs of a fever, without the use of fever-reducing medicines. They should stay home even if they are taking antiviral drugs. (Expect sick employees to be out for about 3 to 5 days in most cases, even if antiviral medications are used.)
- Do not require a doctor's note for employees who have influenza-like illness. Healthcare providers need to focus on patients with more severe illness and may not be able to provide timely documentation.

Sick employees at work should be instructed to go home

- Employees who appear to have flu-like illness should be separated from other employees and asked to go home promptly.
- When possible and if they can tolerate it, employees with influenza-like illness should be given a surgical mask to wear before they go home if they cannot be placed in an area away from others.

Cover coughs and sneezes

- Remind employees about the importance of covering coughs and sneezes with a tissue or, in the absence of a tissue, one's sleeve.
- Place posters in the worksite that encourages cough and sneeze etiquette.
- Provide tissues and no-touch disposal receptacles (trash baskets) for use by employees

Improve hand hygiene

- Instruct employees to wash their hands often with soap and water or use an alcohol-based hand sanitizer, especially after coughing or sneezing.
- Provide proper supplies of soap and water and alcohol-based hand sanitizers in the workplace. Place hand sanitizers in multiple areas or in conference rooms.
- Place posters in the worksite that encourage hand hygiene.

Clean surfaces and items that are more likely to have frequent hand contact

- Frequently clean all commonly touched surfaces in the workplace, such as workstations, countertops, and doorknobs.
- Use the cleaning agents that are usually used in these areas and follow the directions on the label.

Encourage employees to get vaccinated

- Encourage employees to get vaccinated for seasonal influenza.
- Encourage employees to get vaccinated for 2009 H1N1 influenza as recommended by public health officials when vaccines are available.

Advise employees before traveling to take certain steps

- Advise employees to be alert for fever and other signs of influenza-like illness before traveling and notify their supervisor and stay home if they are ill.
- Advise employees who will be traveling or are on temporary assignment about precautions they may need to take and who to call if they become ill.

- Remind employees that they should call a health care provider if they are at increased risk of complications from influenza and become ill while traveling.
- Employees who become ill while traveling or on temporary assignment should notify their supervisor.
- If outside the United States, ill employees should follow your company's policy for obtaining medical care or contact a health care provider or overseas medical assistance company to assist with finding an appropriate health care provider in that country, if needed.

SECTION 3: ACTIONS BUSINESSES AND EMPLOYERS MAY BE ADVISED TO IMPLEMENT LATER

*Under conditions with **increased severity** compared with spring 2009*

Consider active screening of employees who report to work

At the beginning of the workday or with each new shift, all employees should be asked about symptoms consistent with an influenza illness, such as fever or chills AND cough or sore throat.

Extend the period for ill persons to stay home

If influenza severity increases, people with flu-like illness should stay home for at least 7 days, even if they have no more symptoms. If people are still sick, they should stay home until 24 hours after they have no symptoms.

Consider alternative work environments for employees at higher risk for complications of influenza during periods of increased influenza activity in the community

- Remind employees that if they have chronic medical conditions or are pregnant they should consider calling their health care provider for advice about how to reduce their risk of exposure and how best to get early treatment for influenza if they get sick.
- Evaluate the work environment for ways to reduce the number of people that high-risk employees come in contact with, such as:
 - Explore options for telecommuting from home (if feasible).
 - Reassignment to duties that have minimal contact with other employees, clients, or customers.
 - Consider allowing high-risk employees to stay home from work.

Consider increasing social distancing in the workplace

- Implement measures to increase the physical distance between people in the workplace. Aim for **at least 6 feet of distance between people** at most times. These measures may include:
 - Avoiding crowded work settings,
 - Canceling business-related face-to-face meetings,
 - Spacing employees farther apart,
 - Canceling non-essential travel,
 - Increasing use of teleworking, and
 - Using staggered shifts to allow fewer employees to be in the workplace at the same time.

Consider canceling non-essential business travel and advising employees about possible disruptions while traveling overseas

- Travel restrictions may be enacted by some countries that would limit the ability of employees to return home if they become ill.
- Travelers should also be prepared for travel delays, health screenings etc. if they become ill while traveling.
- Provide information about contingency plans and how their travel can be rebooked if these delays occur.