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PUBLISHED BY



OSHA Releases Guidance to Employers to Reduce Workplace Exposure to the Flu

Posted at 2:42 PM on March 4, 2010 by Gerard M. Giordano

Relative to the perceived threat, infections from the 2009 H1N1 flu (swine flu) have produced fewer cases than expected. Nevertheless, employers should not let their guard down and need to remain vigilant to prevent worker exposure to the flu. A flu outbreak can impact productivity and ultimately the bottom line.

To assist employers in minimizing workplace exposure to the flu, on November 9, 2009, the Occupational Safety and Health Administration (“OSHA”) announced the publication of a fact sheet [link “Fact Sheet” to <http://www.osha.gov/h1n1/index.html>] informing employers and employees of ways to reduce risk of exposure to the 2009 H1N1 virus at work. By being proactive and following OSHA’s recommendations, an employer may be able to reduce potential exposure to employees and customers. The OSHA fact sheet provides the following guidance to reduce worker exposure:

- Encourage sick employees to stay home until 24 hours after their fever ends without the use of medication.
- Develop and communicate to management and, where applicable, to employees, procedures for dealing with workers who may become ill. OSHA recommends that if a worker develops flu-like symptoms at work, that employee should be separated from other workers and advised to go home. If the worker cannot be separated from the other employees, the employee should be given

an approved respirator to wear so long as that employee can tolerate wearing a respirator. Employers contemplating providing employees with respirators should consult 29 C.F.R 1910.134.

- Employers need to promote proper hand hygiene and cough etiquette. To this end, workers should have easy access to soap and water, disposable towels, and alcohol-based hand rubs.
- Employers should encourage employees to keep the workplace clean. The employee should be instructed to frequently clean all commonly touched work surfaces and areas. In addition, employees should also be provided with disinfectant and disposable towels to clean their work spaces and surfaces.
- Workers should be encouraged to get vaccinated for seasonal flu and the 2009 H1N1 flu when these vaccinations are available.
- Employers need to educate workers about conditions that may place them at a higher risk for complications from the flu. Specifically, workers should be informed that some people are at a higher risk of complications from the flu and they should consult their doctor about their own risk and what to do if they become ill.
- Employers should reconsider business travel to areas where high illness rates exist. Further, workers should be advised to check themselves for fever and any other signs of flu-like illnesses before starting travel and to notify their supervisors and stay home if they feel ill.
- If disease severity increases in the workplace, employers should be flexible to redesign the workspace or modify job tasks so that employees do not come in close contact with co-workers, clients or visitors. In addition, employers should consider ways to eliminate or minimize face-to-face meetings between staff and clients using such techniques as conference calls, webcasts and other technologies to conduct meetings.

- Employers should prepare for possible school closures or the suspension of childcare programs. To this end, employers should consider a temporary flexible leave policy to allow workers to stay home to care for sick family members or care for children if schools are closed.

Employers and employees can obtain information regarding OSHA's 2009 H1N1 guidance document at www.osha.gov.

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