

H1N1 – “Swine Flu” Preparation for Small Businesses

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September 22, 2009

The H1N1 Influenza Virus is here, and planning ahead may significantly reduce employee and employer misery.

News stories and public awareness programs to stem the impact of a widespread flu outbreak abound, but one publication coaches business owners on how to face the flu threat.

For business owners, the CDC and Department of Homeland Security has issued advice about how to protect workers and develop a flu “disaster” plan. The “Planning for 2009 H1N1 Influenza – A Preparedness Guide for Small Business” is available on the internet at: <http://flu.gov/professional/business/smallbiz.pdf>.

The guidelines acknowledge that employers play a key role in worker health and safety. This manual is intended to help employers meet that goal with practical, common sense recommendations to prevent the spread of the influenza virus. In addition, the publication offers advice about how employers can anticipate administrative, human resource and operations-related problems due to flu-related illness and absences.

Symptoms from the new H1N1 flu are similar to more common strains of influenza and viruses that cause the common cold, including cough, runny nose, sneezing, fever, aches and fatigue. Severity of symptoms is the best indicator of whether you should avoid work and seek medical care.

To get started, the CDC recommends developing a flu action plan. Here are the basic steps:

- 1) Identify a workplace coordinator
- 2) Examine policies for leave, telework, and employee.
- 3) Determine who will be responsible for assisting.
- 4) Identify essential employees, essential business functions, and other critical.
- 5) Share your pandemic plans with employees and clearly communicate expectations.
- 6) Prepare business continuity plans.
- 7) Establish an emergency communications plan.

The small business guidelines also have tips for avoiding viral exposure at work, and ways business can help employees achieve that goal. Eight ways you can prevent the spread of all types of viruses and bacteria are:

- 1) Stay home if you are sick.
- 2) Wash your hands
- 3) Avoid touching your nose, mouth and eyes.
- 4) Cover your coughs and sneezes.
- 5) Wash your hands or use an alcohol-based hand sanitizer after coughing, sneezing, or blowing your nose.
- 6) Keep frequently touched common surfaces clean. For example, telephones, computer equipment, etc.
- 7) Try not to use other workers' phones, desks, offices, or other work tools and equipment.
- 8) Maintain a healthy lifestyle.

Some tips for employers, include:

- 1) Develop policies that encourage ill workers to stay at home without fear of any reprisals.
- 2) Develop other flexible policies to allow workers to telework (if feasible) and create other leave policies.
- 3) Provide resources and a work environment that promotes personal hygiene.
- 4) Provide education and training materials Instruct employees who are well but who Have an ill family member at home with the flu that they can go to work as usual.

- 5) Encourage workers to obtain a seasonal influenza Vaccine. *NOTE: This vaccine is different from the one under development for H1N1.*
- 6) Encourage employees to get the 2009 H1N1 vaccine when it becomes available if they are in a priority group
- 7) Provide workers with up-to-date information on influenza risk factors.
- 8) Plan to implement practices to minimize face-to-face contact between workers if advised by the local health department.
- 9) If an employee does become sick while at work, place the employee in a separate room or area until they can go home, away from other workers.

A section on Frequently Asked Questions about H1N1 Influenza and a great list of internet resources makes this government publication a must read for all business owners.

Additional information about protecting healthcare workers specifically can be found at:

<http://iom.edu/Object.File/Master/72/970/H1N1%20report%20brief%20FINAL%20for%20web.pdf>.

The Institute of Medicine (IOM) report highlights ways to prevent contracting or spreading infections, including novel H1N1 influenza. "Among the many considerations for the health and well-being of healthcare workers is the question about what types of personal protective equipment (PPE) (respiratory protection, gloves, gowns, eye protection, and other equipment) are needed to protect these frontline workers," according to the review commissioned by the CDC and OSHA.

The IOM report also made the specific recommendation that, "Healthcare workers (including those in non-hospital settings) who are in close contact with individuals with H1N1 influenza or influenza-like illnesses should use fit-tested N95 respirators."

So, if your asking yourself questions like: What are we going to do if one or more workers calls in sick? How many bottles or cases of alcohol-based antiseptic gel should I buy? Do we need more paper towels and wastebaskets with sanitary liners? Should we have masks on hand? What's our "Plan B" if this year's flu season makes production squeal to a stop?

The answers may be only a click away. So, take a look at these current recommendations to help your business stay healthy and flu-free.

DISCLAIMER: This article is for informational purposes, and is not intended to reflect or replace actual medical care.

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