



A Flu Update: Proactive Employer Preparations in Advance of a Potential Pandemic

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A Checklist to Guide Your Actions

Government health officials predict millions of Americans will contract the novel H1N1 flu virus, commonly called the Swine Flu. No business will be immune from the effects of this virus. Employers should prepare for the impact of a pandemic on the workplace with a sense of urgency. Proper planning for this serious employment challenge will be essential to protect the health of employees while avoiding disruption of operations.

Employers should monitor the Centers for Disease Control (CDC) and other reliable sources to stay up-to-date on the changing situation.

Novel H1N1 is a new influenza virus causing illness in people that was first detected in April. This virus is spreading from person-to-person worldwide, probably in much the same way that regular seasonal influenza viruses spread. The World Health Organization (WHO) on June 11, said that a pandemic was underway.

The CDC reports that this virus was originally referred to as "swine flu" because laboratory testing showed that many of the genes in this new virus were very similar to influenza viruses that normally occur in pigs in North America. But further study has shown that this new virus is very different from what normally circulates in North American pigs. It has two genes from flu viruses that normally circulate in pigs in Europe and Asia and bird (avian) genes and human genes. Scientists call this a "quadruple reassortant" virus.

For most employers, protecting their employees during a pandemic will depend on two basic approaches: emphasizing "common sense" hygiene (cleaning hands and decontaminating surfaces) and practicing "social distancing." Social distancing means reducing the frequency, proximity, and duration of contact between people (both employees and customers) to reduce the chances of spreading pandemic influenza virus from person-to-person.

Employers should immediately communicate with employees regarding the effect, if any, of H1N1 flu in their workplace, emphasizing the company's willingness to take steps to protect their health. Second, employers need to reassure their employees that there is no need to panic based on a non-specific fear of H1N1 flu exposure in the workplace. Legal problems flow from knee-jerk responses by employees and employers alike.

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Part of every employers' strategy in dealing with the H1N1 flu and a potential pandemic should include: (a) following the guidance from the CDC and other public health services, (b) designating specific individuals to answer all questions involving the flu (after consultation with medical and legal counsel) so that the company will act in a consistent and thoughtful fashion, and (c) plan ahead for potential disruption, reassignment of employees, and response to their concerns.

Click on the file below to download a checklist outlining actions employers should consider in preparing for a potential flu pandemic.

Attachments

22715_Pandemic Checklist

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