

FIGHTING THE FLU – DON'T FORGET TO WASH YOUR HANDS!

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You can't open the newspaper, turn on the television, or visit a website without seeing some alarming statistic about the flu. According to the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC), the flu is already "widespread" in 29 states with an additional 14 states reporting regional flu activity. In addition, because this year's flu vaccine appears to be a poor match for the strains that are showing up, the CDC fears that this flu season may be more deadly than in recent years.

This kind of outbreak takes its toll on people and on business. What should you do if the flu invades your workforce?

Use Common Sense

Several common sense actions can be utilized to help keep a flu epidemic from breaking out at your company. Easily implemented measures include urging workers to thoroughly wash their hands and to use proper cough and sneeze etiquette. Provide cleaning supplies for telephones, keyboards and desks to help limit the spread of germs. Encourage those under the weather to stay at home in order to reduce the contagion. Keep a supply of antibacterial or waterless soap readily available. These are easy, cost-effective steps that may have some positive effects in reducing sickness.

Take A More Proactive Approach

Depending on your business operations and the potential effect of a widespread flu outbreak among your workers, you may want to take a more aggressive approach to help limit flu cases. For example, you may want to consider

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suspending or changing some of your workplace policies in order to encourage workers to avoid spreading the flu. You may want to temporarily alter your paid-time-off or attendance policy to lessen the chance that sick employees will rush back to work.

Or perhaps you could permit workers to work from home during an outbreak so that an entire department doesn't get wiped out for days or even weeks. At the first sign of symptoms, consider sending sick workers home or providing them with protective gear, such as face masks, to help prevent the spread of germs.

Another possibility is educating employees about the flu vaccine and its benefits. Despite its occasional ineffectiveness against certain strains of the flu, the CDC and medical professionals still urge folks to get the flu vaccine to lessen the effects of an outbreak. Consider suggesting or encouraging employees to get a flu shot, perhaps even bringing in a qualified medical professional to administer shots at your workplace.

The Pushback To Mandatory Vaccination

Should you make flu shots mandatory? Requiring employees to get vaccinated is a controversial issue. Many workers will refuse to comply, although in some industries, such as healthcare, mandatory flu shots are common.

The Occupational Safety and Health Administration (OSHA) and the Equal Employment Opportunity Commission (EEOC) have largely tapped into the CDC policies to determine the applicability of mandatory flu shots, and the proper assessment of handling infectious diseases. A risk assessment is essential in making such a determination, and the nature of the workplace and the responsibilities of the employees will be a major factor.

Certainly some jobs and some businesses will face far more serious problems with the flu than others, and you must be prepared to take into consideration many elements when an employee objects to the vaccination. For example, is the worker objecting to the vaccine on religious grounds? Would the vaccine aggravate another health condition? Does the employee simply fear needles?

According to the EEOC, an employer must interact with the employees who object to vaccines, whether based on religious or health reasons. You need to consider possible

issues under the Americans With Disabilities Act (ADA) and whether reasonable accommodations are necessary.

Collective Bargaining Concerns

If your employees are represented by a union, remember that you may have a duty to bargain about flu-prevention policies. Before you make any policy changes or implement any mandatory actions, make sure that you can do so under the collective bargaining agreement.

Don't Ignore Precautions

The flu is an annual issue, but this year, the potential for widespread outbreaks appears more likely than ever. Your business can be adversely impacted if you don't take precautions early in the flu season. The actions are simple – the results can be very helpful.

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