

Questions and Answers about *CDC's Guidance for Businesses and Employers to Plan and Respond to the 2009–2010 Influenza Season*

About the Guidance for Businesses and Employers

Q. How does CDC's new flu guidance for businesses differ from the previous business guidance documents?

The new guidance applies to any flu virus circulating during the 2009-2010 flu season, not only 2009 H1N1 flu. It will be very hard to tell if someone who is sick has 2009 H1N1 flu or seasonal flu. It offers specific steps for business owners and managers to take to protect workers and to maintain continuity of operations. It provides guidance for the current flu conditions as well as for more severe flu conditions.

This guidance also recommends that, based on current flu conditions, employees with flu-like illness stay home until at least 24 hours after they no longer have a fever (100 degrees Fahrenheit or 38 degrees Celsius) or signs of a fever (have chills, feel very warm, have a flushed appearance, or are sweating). This should be determined without the use of fever-reducing medications (any medicine that contains ibuprofen or acetaminophen). This is a shorter time period than the previous guidance, which recommended that sick people stay home for 7 days after symptoms began. The 7-day period would still be recommended in business settings under more severe flu conditions.

Q. What types of businesses should follow this guidance?

The guidance is intended for businesses of all sizes and types except those that cover healthcare services. People who care for sick people as part of their jobs will need to take additional steps to protect themselves because of their risk at work. Specific guidance for steps health care workers should take for 2009 H1N1 flu can be found at: www.cdc.gov/h1n1flu/clinicians/



Rationale for Planning

Q. Why should businesses plan for a flu response?

Businesses may have already been impacted by the spring 2009 H1N1 flu outbreak. Steps can be taken now to slow the spread of flu in the workplace. It is also possible that flu conditions may become more severe, so it is important to plan now for how to respond under those circumstances. An estimated 25% of businesses do not reopen following a major disaster, according to the Institute for Business and Home Safety. A severe flu pandemic could have a major effect on the global economy, including travel, trade, tourism, food, financial markets and other types of businesses. Business planning for pandemic influenza is essential to minimize a pandemic's impact.

Planning from the outset can help protect your business and your employees if flu conditions become more severe. Planning can help

- ▶ minimize disruption to business activities,
- ▶ protect employees' health and safety, and
- ▶ limit the negative impact to the community, economy, and society.

Q. Why should we be concerned about the spread of flu in the workplace?

The workplace may act as a "point of spread," where employees can easily spread flu to their fellow employees as well as to others in the community. The flu can have a major impact on business operations, causing workers to stay home because they are sick or because they need to care for sick family members. They may also need to stay home and take care of their children, if schools dismiss students or childcare programs close. The guidance and this toolkit provide action steps that business owners, managers, and employees can take to minimize the effect of flu in the workplace.

How to Plan and Prepare

Q. What should businesses do to prepare?

- ▶ **Review your current pandemic flu plan or develop a new plan.** Involve your employees in development and review of the plan.
 - Conduct an exercise, drill, or discussion to test key components of your plan.
 - Share your plan with employees and explain what policies, leave options, pay, and benefits will be available to them.
- ▶ **Engage your state and local health department** to confirm channels of communication and methods for dissemination of local outbreak information.
- ▶ **Review sick-leave policies** and consider making them flexible and consistent with public health recommendations. Make sure employees are well-aware of these policies.
- ▶ **Try to provide flexible leave policies** to allow workers to stay home to care for sick household members or for children, if schools dismiss students or childcare programs close.
- ▶ **Share best practices with other businesses in your community.** Work with companies in your supply chain as well as chambers of commerce and local associations to improve response efforts.
- ▶ **Add a “widget” or “button” to your company Web page or employee Web site** so employees can access the latest information on the flu:
 - www.cdc.gov/widgets
 - www.cdc.gov/SocialMedia/Campaigns/H1N1/buttons.html
 - www.hhs.gov/web/library/hhsfluwidgets.html
 - www.flu.gov/news/socialmedia
- ▶ **Purchase supplies** such as tissues, soap, and alcohol-based hand cleaners to encourage healthful habits in the workplace.

Q. What should a business include in a pandemic flu plan?

A flu response plan should do the following:

- ▶ Provide a variety of measures to protect workers and ensure that business operations can continue.
- ▶ Identify essential business functions and critical supply chains (e.g., raw materials, suppliers, sub-contractor services/products, and logistics) that are needed to keep your business running. Plan how your business will operate if a high number of employees must stay home or supply chains are interrupted.
- ▶ Create policies for flexible sick leave, worksites (e.g., telecommuting), and work hours (e.g., staggered shifts) to promote social distancing if flu conditions become more severe.
 - If possible, develop plans for the IT infrastructure needed to support more teleworkers.
 - Consider changing business operations (e.g., possibly changing or closing operations in affected areas) and ways to transfer knowledge to key employees.
- ▶ Set up triggers and procedures for starting and ending your pandemic flu response plan. Work closely with your local health officials to identify these triggers.
- ▶ Establish a process to communicate information to workers and business partners on your pandemic flu response plans and the latest flu information.

Q. Why should businesses have flexible leave policies or alternate work schedules?

An important way to reduce the spread of flu is to keep sick people away from those who are not sick. Therefore, any worker who has flu-like symptoms should stay home and not come to work. It is possible that employees will need to take care of sick household members or care for children if schools are dismissed or childcare programs are closed. Flexible leave policies and alternate work schedules will help prevent the spread of flu at your workplace, allow employees to continue to work or function while limiting contact with others, help maintain continuity of operations, and help people manage their health and their family's needs.

Steps for Businesses under Current Flu Conditions

Q. What steps can businesses take to keep employees from getting sick?

Businesses should take the following steps to keep employees from getting sick with flu. These steps should be followed ALL the time, not only during a flu outbreak.

- ▶ **Advise all employees to stay home if they are sick** until at least 24 hours after they no longer have a fever (100 degrees Fahrenheit or 38 degrees Celsius) or signs of a fever (have chills, feel very warm, has a flushed appearance, or is sweating). This should be determined without the use of fever-reducing medicines (any medicine that contains ibuprofen or acetaminophen). They should stay home until at least 24 hours after they no longer have a fever, even if they are using antiviral medicines. Businesses should review their policies and practices to consider ways to allow flexibility for employees to stay home when they are sick.
- ▶ **Encourage respiratory etiquette** by providing
 - education and reminders about covering coughs and sneezes with tissues, and
 - easy access to tissues and trash cans.
- ▶ **Encourage hand hygiene** by providing
 - education and reminders about washing their hands, and
 - easy access to running water and soap or alcohol-based hand cleaners.
- ▶ **Separate employees who become sick at work from other staff and ask them to go home.**
- ▶ **Routinely clean surfaces and items that are more likely to have frequent hand contact** with cleaning agents that are usually used in these areas. Additional disinfection beyond routine cleaning is not recommended.
- ▶ **Encourage sick employees at higher risk of complications from flu to contact their health care provider as soon as possible.** Taking antiviral medicines early might prevent severe complications from the flu, such as hospitalization or death. People at higher risk for flu complications include pregnant women and people with chronic medical conditions (such as asthma, heart disease, or diabetes).

- ▶ **Prepare for employees to stay home from work and plan ways for essential business functions to continue.** Employees may stay home because they are sick, need to care for sick household members, or because schools have been dismissed and they need to care for their children. Cross-train staff to perform essential functions so that the business can continue operating.
- ▶ **Encourage all employees who want protection from flu to get vaccinated for seasonal flu.** Also encourage employees who are at higher risk for 2009 H1N1 flu complications to get the 2009 H1N1 flu vaccine when it becomes available. People at higher risk for 2009 H1N1 flu complications include pregnant women and people with chronic medical conditions (such as asthma, heart disease, or diabetes). Review the health benefits you offer your employees and consider including flu vaccination. If possible, you should offer seasonal flu vaccination opportunities at the worksite.
- ▶ **Provide information to employees overseas** about what to do if they become sick.

Q. What is the best way to practice good hand hygiene?

Wash your hands with soap and water for at least 20 seconds (the time it takes to sing “Happy Birthday” twice). Be sure to wash both sides of the hands, between fingers and under the nails. That is the best way to keep your hands from spreading the virus.

Alcohol-based hand cleaners containing at least 60% alcohol are also effective. After applying the hand cleaner, rub hands until dry. If you cannot wash your hands with soap and water and do not have an alcohol-based hand cleaner, other hand cleaners (that do not have alcohol in them) may kill flu germs on hands. There is not as much information about whether these types of hand cleaners are effective.

Q. How long should a sick employee stay home?

Under current flu conditions, employees with flu-like symptoms should stay home for at least 24 hours *after* they no longer have a fever (100 degrees Fahrenheit or 38 degrees Celsius) or signs of a fever (have chills, feel very warm, have a flushed appearance, or are sweating). This should be determined without the use of fever-reducing medications (any medicine that contains ibuprofen or acetaminophen).

The sick person may decide to stop taking fever-reducing medicines as he or she begins to feel better. This person should continue to monitor his or her temperature until it has been normal for 24 hours.

If flu conditions become more severe, the sick employee should stay home for 7 days. A person who is still sick after 7 days should stay home until 24 hours after their symptoms have gone away.

Sick people should stay at home, except if they need to get medical care, and they should avoid contact with others. Keeping people with a fever at home may reduce the number of people who get infected with the flu virus.

Q. Should household members of sick people stay home, too?

No, an employee with an ill household member may go to work. It is especially important that these employees monitor themselves for illness.

Employees with school-aged children may need to stay home to care for their children. Employers should review leave policies for the flexibility to allow employees to stay home if they need to care for their children or other household members.

If flu conditions are more severe, CDC guidance for school-aged children is that they should stay home for 5 days from the time someone in their home became sick. However, this guidance does not apply to adults.

Q. What are fever-reducing medications?

Fever-reducing medications are medicines that contain acetaminophen (such as Tylenol®) or ibuprofen (such as Motrin®). These medicines can be given to people who are sick with flu to help bring their fever down and relieve their pain. Aspirin (acetylsalicylic acid) **should not** be given to children or teenagers (anyone 18 years old and younger) who have flu; this can cause a rare but serious illness called Reye's syndrome.

Q. Can the flu virus live on surfaces, such as computer keyboards?

Yes, the virus can live on hard objects up to 8 hours. Flu viruses may be spread when a person touches a hard surface (such as a desk or doorknob) or an object (such as a keyboard or pen) where the virus has landed and then touches his or her eyes, nose, or mouth. Routine cleaning of surfaces will help stop the virus from spreading in this way.

Routinely clean surfaces and items that are more likely to have frequent hand contact with cleaning agents that are usually used in these areas. Additional disinfection beyond routine cleaning is not recommended.

Symptoms

Q. How do I know if someone has 2009 H1N1 flu or seasonal flu?

It will be very hard to tell if someone who is sick has 2009 H1N1 flu or seasonal flu. Public health officials and medical authorities will not be recommending laboratory tests. Anyone who has the symptoms of flu-like illness should stay home and not go to work.

Symptoms of flu include fever or chills *and* cough or sore throat. In addition, symptoms of flu can include runny nose, body aches, headache, tiredness, diarrhea, or vomiting.

Q. How do I recognize a fever or signs of a fever?

A fever is a temperature taken with a thermometer that is equal to or greater than 100 degrees Fahrenheit (38 degrees Celsius). If a sick employee's temperature cannot be taken, look for these possible signs of fever: if he or she feels very warm, has a flushed appearance, or is sweating or shivering.

People at Higher Risk for Complications

Q. Who is at higher risk for complications from flu?

Anyone can get the flu (even healthy people) and anyone can have serious problems from the flu. However, children younger than 5 years of age, pregnant women, people of any age with chronic medical conditions (such as pulmonary disease, asthma, diabetes, neuromuscular disorders, or heart disease), and people 65 years of age and older are more likely to get complications from the flu.

Q. What should a pregnant employee do to prevent getting sick with flu?

Pregnant women should follow the same guidance as the general public about staying home when sick, hand hygiene, respiratory etiquette, and routine cleaning.

Pregnant women are at higher risk of complications from flu and, like all people at higher risk, should speak with their health care provider as soon as possible if they develop flu-like symptoms. Early treatment with antiviral flu medicines is recommended for pregnant women who

have the flu; these medicines are most effective when started within the first 48 hours of feeling sick.

Pregnant women should know that they are part of the first priority group to receive the 2009 H1N1 flu vaccine when it becomes available. Seasonal flu vaccine is also recommended for pregnant women and can be given at any time during pregnancy.

Steps for Businesses under More Severe Flu Conditions

Q. What additional steps should businesses and employees take if the flu becomes more severe?

In addition to the steps that businesses should be taking all the time to prevent flu, businesses and employees should consider adding the following steps if flu conditions become more severe.

- ▶ **Conduct active screening of employees when they arrive at work.** Ask all employees about symptoms during the previous 24 hours. Symptoms of flu include fever or chills *and* cough or sore throat. In addition, symptoms of flu can include runny nose, body aches, headache, tiredness, diarrhea, or vomiting. Workers who have flu-like symptoms should be asked to go home. Continue to advise workers to check for any signs of illness before coming to work each day.
- ▶ **Extend the time sick employees stay home to at least 7 days.** People who are still sick after 7 days should continue to stay home until at least 24 hours after symptoms have gone away, even if they feel better sooner. Review sick-leave policies and consider making them flexible and consistent with public health recommendations.
- ▶ **Try to change work duties, workspace, or work schedules for employees who are at higher risk for flu complications** to reduce the possibility of getting sick at work. If this cannot be done, allow these employees to work from home, or stay home, if feasible. These employees should make this decision in consultation with their health care provider. People at higher risk for flu complications include pregnant women and people with chronic medical conditions (such as asthma, heart disease, or diabetes).
- ▶ **Prepare for employees to stay home from work and plan ways for essential business functions to continue.** Employees may stay home because they are sick, are at higher risk for complications, need to care for sick household members, or because schools have been dismissed or childcare centers have closed and they need to care for their children. Cross-train staff to perform essential functions so that business operations can continue.

- ▶ **Find ways to increase social distances** (the space between people) in the workplace, if possible.
- ▶ **Make contingency plans for increased absenteeism caused by illness.** This could include cross training and hiring temporary workers.
- ▶ **Provide guidance to employees who are traveling overseas on what to do if they become sick.** Also provide information about possible travel delays, health screenings, and other activities targeted towards travelers leaving other countries for the United States. Health information for travelers can be found at www.cdc.gov/travel.

Q. What can businesses do to increase social distance during a more severe flu outbreak?

Employers should think creatively about ways to increase the space between people, while still keeping the business operating. Some options for social distancing are:

- ▶ cancelling non-essential face-to-face meetings and trying conference calls or Internet-based meetings instead,
- ▶ cancelling non-essential business travel,
- ▶ spacing workers farther apart in the workplace,
- ▶ allowing flexible work hours so fewer workers will be in the workplace at the same time, and
- ▶ offering telework options for employees.

Q. How will businesses know if the flu is more severe and they should consider taking additional action steps?

CDC and its partners will continue to monitor the spread of flu, the severity of the illness it's causing, and whether the virus is changing. State and local health departments will also be on the lookout for increases in severe illness in their areas and will provide guidance to their communities. Businesses should work closely with state and local public health officials to guide their flu response. Public health agencies will communicate changes in severity and the extent of flu-like illness to ensure that businesses have the information they need to choose the right steps to reduce the impact of flu.