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6-2009

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AFL-CIO

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# What Workers Need to Know About Pandemic Flu: Protecting Workers During Pandemic Flu

## **Abstract**

[Excerpt] This fact sheet tells how to set up an infection control program that will make workplaces safer during a pandemic flu.

A pandemic flu will have a huge impact on workers in the United States. During the worst part of a pandemic flu, 40% to 60% of workers may have to stay home. Some workers are more likely to get sick, like health care workers and those who respond to an emergency. Workers who have a lot of close contact with the public are also in danger. Whenever workers are at risk of getting the virus, employers must take steps to prevent it from spreading. This is called infection control.

## **Keywords**

pandemic flu, workplace, flu, influenza, health care, OSHA, safe work practices, controls, Occupational Safety and Health

## **Comments**

### **Suggested Citation**

AFL-CIO. (2009). *What workers need to know about pandemic flu: Protecting workers during pandemic flu*. Washington, DC: Author.

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## What Workers Need to Know About Pandemic Flu

### Protecting Workers During Pandemic Flu

#### How will a pandemic flu affect workers?

A pandemic flu will have a huge impact on workers in the United States. During the worst part of a pandemic flu, 40% to 60% of workers may have to stay home. Some workers are more likely to get sick, like health care workers and those who respond to an emergency. Workers who have a lot of close contact with the public are also in danger. Whenever workers are at risk of getting the virus, employers must take steps to prevent it from spreading. This is called infection control.

The Occupational Safety and Health Administration (OSHA) is a federal (national) government agency. OSHA's main purpose is to protect the health and safety of workers in the United States. One way OSHA does this is by making and enforcing health and safety rules (standards). Unfortunately, there is no OSHA standard for pandemic flu or infectious disease. However, employers still have to take action to protect workers.

In order to protect workers, **employers should plan and prepare an infection control program. Unions should be involved in every step of this process.** Since the H1N1 flu is now spreading around the U.S. and since the World Health Organization had declared it a full blown pandemic, **NOW** is the time.

This fact sheet tells how to set up an infection control program that will make workplaces safer during a pandemic flu.

## **How does the flu virus spread?**

It is important to know how the flu virus spreads in order to give workers the best protection during a flu pandemic. There are a number of ways the flu virus spreads. The three most likely are:

- A worker can catch the virus when an infected person near them coughs, sneezes or even talks. Large droplets containing the virus can come into direct contact with the worker's nose, mouth and eyes.
- A worker can also catch the virus when an infected person coughs or sneezes and small droplets containing the virus remain suspended in the air. These droplets are small enough to be breathed in by a worker.
- A worker can catch the virus when they touch an infected person or an object or surface that is contaminated with the virus and then touch their own mouth, eyes, or nose. It is not known exactly how long the flu virus can live for on nonporous surfaces like tables, doorknobs and desks – some sources say 2 hours or longer, other sources say 24 to 48 hours.

Employers need to protect workers from all ways that the flu virus can spread.

## **How do employers set up an infection control program?**

An infection control program helps prevent the spread of the virus. The following steps will help employers set up a basic infection control program.

### **1. Develop an exposure control plan**

An exposure control plan is a written plan that identifies:

- Workers who are more likely to be exposed to the virus,
- Activities and locations in a workplace that could expose workers to the virus,
- Ways for finding out if a worker has come into contact with the virus, and

- Guidelines for deciding how and when to put the infection control plan into action.

## 2. **Decide on the best ways to control the spread of the virus**

An employer should come up with a list of ways to control the spread of the virus – from the most effective to the least effective. Because some ways are better than others, this is called the “hierarchy of controls.”

The best way to control a hazard is to use engineering controls. This is followed by safe work practices, administrative controls, and personal protective equipment. These methods for controlling a hazard are explained below.

### **Engineering Controls**

Engineering controls keep workers from coming into contact with the flu virus. This is done by designing safer workplaces. For example:

- Installing portable (moveable) ventilation systems,
- Having infected workers wear plastic sneeze guards, and
- Setting up special isolation rooms for infected workers.

### **Work Practices**

Safe work practices can be a very good way to protect workers from getting the flu virus. Examples include:

- Frequent handwashing with soap and water or using alcohol-based disposable hand wipes or gel sanitizer,
- Regular cleaning of surfaces that are frequently touched and could be contaminated, like telephones and computers,
- Avoiding close contact or shaking hands with co-workers, customers and clients,
- Covering the nose and mouth for all coughs and sneezes with disposable tissues and throwing them away in “no-touch” containers,
- Keeping all eating, drinking, or smoking away from areas where workers might come into contact with the virus, and

- Stopping or reducing the practice of sharing desks or other office equipment.

### **Administrative Controls**

Administrative controls are changes the employer makes to the work schedule or job tasks in order to reduce exposure.

Examples include:

- Reducing contact between workers by using email, phone calls, and teleconferences,
- Setting up flexible work hours to reduce the number of workers at the workplace at the same time,
- Allowing workers to work from their homes, if possible,
- Decreasing work-related travel so that workers are not exposed to other high risk workplaces, and
- Having a policy that allows workers to stay home when they or a family member are sick, with no loss in pay or discipline.

### **Personal Protective Equipment (PPE)**

Personal protective equipment is the least effective way to protect workers from a hazard. However, the use of PPE is important during a flu pandemic. The type of PPE chosen must follow the guidelines found in OSHA Standard 1910.132.

Examples of PPE that can be used include:

- Gloves,
- Disposable clothing,
- Face shields,
- Aprons,
- Goggles,
- Disposable shoe covers, and
- Respirators (which are covered by a separate OSHA Standard 1910.134).

### **Respirators**

“Particulate filtering respirators” should be used to protect workers from pandemic flu. This is because the pandemic flu

virus is a “particle” (very small pieces of matter). Particulate filtering respirators are the only respirators that can filter out particles to protect workers from breathing in the virus.

**Surgical masks are not respirators and will not protect workers from breathing in these particles.**

OSHA has the following recommendations about respirators and pandemic flu:

- Use N95 or higher-rated filter respirators for “high-risk” workers like health care workers or emergency responders.
- Use a powered air purifying respirator (PAPR) if health care workers have to insert an instrument into the patient’s airway (for example, to do a bronchoscopy or intubation).
- Consider using respirators for workers who have a lot of contact with people on the job (like schools, crowded work places, and busy stores) and who have close contact with people who might have pandemic flu.

Any time workers are required to wear respirators, employers must follow OSHA’s Respiratory Protection Standard 1910.134. One part of this standard requires workers to be “fit-tested” to make sure that the respirator fits right.

**NOTE that the AFL-CIO recommends using more protective respirators for high risk workers (like health care workers and emergency responders). The AFL-CIO recommends a P100 respirator with an elastomeric (rubber-like) facepiece seal or a powered air purifying respirator (PAPR) with a high efficiency filter.**

### **3. Monitor workers’ health**

Employers should monitor workers’ health by setting up a medical surveillance program. This program should include the following:

- How to recognize symptoms of pandemic flu virus,
- How to identify workers who may be sick with the flu,

- Steps to take with infected workers, like sending them home until they are well and medical removal protection (MRP) so they will not lose any pay, benefits, or other rights while they are sick,
- Rules for giving out available medicines (like the pandemic flu vaccine, if available, or other medicines that can fight the virus).

#### **4. Train workers**

Employers need to train workers about pandemic flu in the workplace. The training should include information on:

- Ways to catch the virus at work,
- Symptoms of pandemic flu,
- Methods to prevent the flu virus from spreading,
- Medical surveillance program, and
- OSHA's Respiratory Protection Standard.

#### **5. Post warning signs and labels**

Employers need to post warning signs and labels that tell workers where they can come into contact with the virus. Signs and labels should also explain how workers can protect themselves from exposure.

#### **6. Keep the workplace clean**

Employers should develop a program for cleaning and disinfecting equipment and surfaces that could be contaminated. The program should also have guidelines for handling and throwing away contaminated waste.

#### **7. Keep good medical records**

Employers should keep records of how they have followed workers' health (medical surveillance). Detailed records should be kept on each worker who becomes infected with the pandemic flu virus – how they got it and where. Employers must allow workers and their unions to see and have copies of these records under OSHA's Standard 1910.1020.



## **Is your workplace prepared for a pandemic flu?**

H1N1 flu is spreading around the U.S. It has now been declared a pandemic by the World Health Organization. Employers have to be prepared. If not, they will not be able to stop the rapid spread of the virus in workplaces. It is very important that employers have health and safety programs and policies in place **NOW**.

### **These are the key points:**

- Workers can catch the pandemic flu virus when an infected person near them coughs, sneezes or talks. They can also get the virus when a worker touches an infected person or an object that is contaminated and then touches their own mouth, eyes or nose.
- Every employer should develop and implement an infection control plan **NOW** to limit the spread of the virus.
- Employers should train workers on the signs and symptoms of pandemic flu and on the infection control plan.