

What Employers Can Do to Protect Workers from Pandemic Influenza

During an influenza pandemic, transmission of the pandemic virus can be anticipated in the workplace, not only from patients to workers in healthcare settings, but also from customers and coworkers in general work settings. Employers can use a set of occupational safety and health controls referred to as the “hierarchy of controls” to reduce exposures to pandemic influenza in their workplaces. The types of control measures, listed from most effective to least effective, that may be used to protect yourself, your workers and your customers are:

- Engineering controls;
- Administrative controls;
- Work practices; and
- Personal protective equipment (PPE).

Most employers will use a combination of these control methods. There are advantages and disadvantages to each type of measure when considering the ease of implementation, effectiveness and cost.

Engineering controls are those that involve making changes to the work environment to reduce work-related hazards. These types of controls are preferred over all others because they make permanent changes that reduce exposure to hazards and do not rely on worker or customer behavior. By reducing a hazard in the workplace, engineering controls can be the most cost-effective solutions for employers to implement.

Examples include:

- Installing physical barriers, such as clear plastic sneeze guards.
- Installing a drive-through window for customer service.
- Using specialized negative-pressure ventilation for aerosol-generating procedures in healthcare settings.

Administrative controls are those that modify workers' work schedules and tasks in ways that minimize their exposure to workplace hazards.

Examples include:

- Developing policies that encourage ill workers to stay at home without fear of any reprisals.
- Discontinuing nonessential travel to locations having high prevalence of illness.
- Developing practices to minimize face-to-face contact between workers such as extended use of e-mail, websites and teleconferences. Where possible, encourage flexible work arrangements such as telecommuting or flexible work hours to reduce the number of workers who must be at the work site at one time or in one specific location.
- Relying on home delivery of goods and services to reduce the number of clients or customers who must visit your workplace.
- Developing emergency communications plans. Maintain a forum for answering workers' concerns. Develop Internet-based communications, if feasible.

Work practices are procedures for safe and proper work that are used to reduce the duration, frequency or intensity of exposure to a hazard. When defining safe work practice controls, it is a good idea to ask your workers for their suggestions, since they have firsthand experience with the tasks. These controls need to be understood and followed by managers, supervisors and workers.

Examples include:

- Providing resources and a work environment that promotes personal hygiene. For example, provide tissues, no-touch trash cans, hand soap, hand sanitizer, disinfectants and disposable towels for workers to clean their work surfaces.
- Encouraging workers to obtain a seasonal influenza vaccine (this helps to prevent illness from seasonal influenza strains that may continue to circulate).
- Providing workers with up-to-date education and training on influenza risk factors, protective behaviors, and instruction on proper behaviors (for example, cough etiquette; avoiding touching eyes, nose and mouth; and proper care of PPE).

- Providing education and training materials in an easy to understand format and in the appropriate language and literacy level for all employees.
- Developing procedures to minimize contacts between workers and between workers and clients or customers.

Personal Protective Equipment (PPE) is protective gear needed to keep workers safe while performing their jobs. Examples of PPE include respirators (for example, N95), face shields, goggles and disposable gloves. While engineering and administrative controls and proper work practices are considered to be more effective in minimizing exposure to the influenza virus, the use of PPE may also be indicated during certain exposure situations and during emergencies. The appropriate types of PPE for use during a pandemic will be based on the risk of contracting influenza while working and the availability of PPE. Check the www.pandemicflu.gov website for the latest guidance.

It is important that PPE be:

- Selected based upon the hazard to the worker;
- Properly fitted and some need to be periodically refitted (e.g., respirators);
- Conscientiously and properly worn;
- Regularly maintained and replaced in accordance with manufacturer's specifications;
- Properly removed and disposed of to avoid contamination of self, others or the environment; and
- If reusable, properly removed, cleaned, disinfected and stored.

If used correctly, PPE can help prevent some exposures; however, they should not take the place of other prevention interventions, such as engineering controls, cough etiquette and hand hygiene.

For additional information on what employers can do to protect their workers, please refer to

OSHA Publication No. 3327, entitled *Guidance on Preparing Workplaces for an Influenza Pandemic*, which can be accessed at: www.osha.gov. Also consult www.pandemicflu.gov to obtain current and additional detailed information about all aspects of pandemic influenza.

Workers' Rights

Workers have the right to:

- Working conditions that do not pose a risk of serious harm.
- Receive information and training (in a language and vocabulary the worker understands) about workplace hazards, methods to prevent them, and the OSHA standards that apply to their workplace.
- Review records of work-related injuries and illnesses.
- File a complaint asking OSHA to inspect their workplace if they believe there is a serious hazard or that their employer is not following OSHA's rules. OSHA will keep all identities confidential.
- Exercise their rights under the law without retaliation, including reporting an injury or raising health and safety concerns with their employer or OSHA. If a worker has been retaliated against for using their rights, they must file a complaint with OSHA as soon as possible, but no later than 30 days.

For additional information, see **OSHA's Workers page** (www.osha.gov/workers).

How to Contact OSHA

Under the Occupational Safety and Health Act of 1970, employers are responsible for providing safe and healthful workplaces for their employees. OSHA's role is to help ensure these conditions for America's working men and women by setting and enforcing standards, and providing training, education, and assistance. For more information, visit www.osha.gov or call OSHA at 1-800-321-OSHA (6742), TTY 1-877-889-5627.

This is one in a series of informational fact sheets highlighting OSHA programs, policies or standards. It does not impose any new compliance requirements. For a comprehensive list of compliance requirements of OSHA standards or regulations, refer to Title 29 of the Code of Federal Regulations. This information will be made available to sensory-impaired individuals upon request. The voice phone is (202) 693-1999; teletypewriter (TTY) number: (877) 889-5627.



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