



Guidance for Preventing the Spread of H1N1 (swine origin) Influenza in the Workplace

As cases of H1N1 flu continue to rise, employers should be familiar with simple measures to reduce the risk of infection in the workplace and prepare for the impact of illness on their operations. This guidance is intended for general workplace settings, such as offices, stores, restaurants. Additional guidance is available for health care settings and employees that perform home visits at www.nyc.gov/health.

What is H1N1 Influenza?

H1N1 flu is caused by a new virus that recently emerged in Mexico and the United States and has spread throughout the world. Like seasonal flu, it causes illness that can range from mild to severe.

What are the symptoms of H1N1 influenza?

H1N1 influenza symptoms appear similar to those of seasonal flu. They can include fever and a range of other symptoms such as cough, sore throat, fatigue, headache, body aches, lethargy, stuffy nose and chills. Some affected people have also reported diarrhea and vomiting.

How is the H1N1 influenza virus spread?

Like all flu viruses, H1N1 (SO) spreads mainly through respiratory droplets that are released when an infected person coughs or sneezes. People can also become infected by touching a surface with virus on it (like a door knob) and then touching their mouths or noses.

How severe is H1N1 influenza?

So far, we have no evidence that H1N1 flu is more, or less, severe than seasonal flu. While most cases are mild and most people recover quickly without medical treatment, we are now seeing more hospitalizations and more severe illness. This is to be expected as the overall number of cases rises.

Who is at risk for complications from H1N1 influenza?

People with underlying health conditions are at the highest risk of developing severe illness from H1N1 flu. If you have an underlying condition and develop flu-like illness (fever, accompanied by cough or sore throat), please call your doctor immediately to discuss treatment with antiviral medication.

Those at higher risk include:

- People over 65 or under 2 years of age
- People with lung disorders, such as asthma or emphysema
- People with heart, kidney, liver or blood disorders
- People with diabetes

- People with weak immune systems due to illness or medication
- Pregnant women
- People on long-term aspirin therapy

How can I reduce the risk of illness in the workplace?

- Most importantly, remind employees that they should not come to work if they have flu-like symptoms (fever and cough). They should not return until 24 hours after their symptoms resolve.
- Encourage employees to avoid touching their eyes, noses or mouths; and to wash their hands before and after eating, after using the bathroom, and any time hands are soiled. If a workplace lacks soap and water, an alcohol-based hand sanitizer containing 60% to 95% alcohol is a good substitute. Good hand hygiene is the best protection against infection and should always be practiced after contact with frequently-touched surfaces or other people's hands.
- Employers should review sick leave policies to determine whether policies are up to date and adequate to address employee questions and potential absences.
- Employees should review sick leave policies and be familiar with their employers' policies for handling absences prompted by illness or the need to care for household members who are sick.

Should workers wear masks to prevent the spread of the H1N1 flu?

- No. Workers in general workplace settings (offices, stores, restaurants, manufacturing plants) do not need to wear masks. But any worker with flu-like illness should stay home until 24 hours after their symptoms resolve.
- Workers in health care settings should follow their standard procedures for infection control. Guidance for infection control in hospitals and outpatient medical facilities is posted at the Health Department's H1N1 Influenza Web page: www.nyc.gov/html/doh/html/cd/cd-h1n1flu.shtml.

What precautions can help prevent the spread of the H1N1 influenza in offices and public places?

No special precautions are needed, but buildings managers and owners should enforce good maintenance practices:

- Stock hand-washing facilities with soap and paper towels, and clean them regularly. Keep sinks, faucets, drains, toilets and plumbing in good working order. Provide wastebaskets for the used tissues and towels, and empty them regularly.
- Routinely clean frequently-touched surfaces such as doorknobs, door handles, common keyboards, handrails and telephones, as well as surfaces in bathrooms, cafeterias, and offices.
- Post signs advising employees and visitors to wash their hands frequently and to cover their coughs. The Health Department has signs available for download at www.nyc.gov/html/doh/downloads/pdf/cd/cyc-poster-comm.pdf.
- Keep heating and ventilation systems in good working order, in accordance with system specifications and any applicable regulations.

There is currently no evidence that special vacuuming equipment or procedures are necessary. Upholstery, carpets, drapes and vertical surfaces don't require special cleaning unless they are visibly soiled.

What should I use to clean surfaces?

The H1N1 (SO) virus can be killed with common household or commercial detergents and disinfectants. Use general household cleaners or soap and water. As an added precaution, disinfectants can be used on frequently-touched surfaces.

- If hard surfaces are visibly dirty, clean first using general cleaner or soap and water. After surface has been cleaned, apply disinfectant following product instructions.
- Disinfectant wipes can be used to clean small surfaces. Discard wipes after using them.
- If disinfectants are not available, use a chlorine bleach solution made by adding 1 tablespoon of bleach to a quart (4 cups) of water. Discard the solution after using it.
- Never mix bleach with cleaning products – you may create hazardous vapors.
- Additional information on registered disinfectants and antimicrobial products is available at www.epa.gov/oppad001/influenza-disinfectants.html and www.nyhealth.gov/diseases/communicable/influenza/seasonal/swine_flu/cleaning_and_disinfectants.htm.

Should workers take precautions when cleaning?

- Workplace safety and health programs should train all cleaning staff on the safe use of cleaning and disinfectant products.
- Cleaning staff should read and follow label directions when using disinfectants and cleaning products. Worker should wear gloves as instructed when mixing or spraying cleaning products, and remove their gloves when moving from one work area to the next.
- Cleaning products should not be stored in unlabeled containers.
- Workers who handle potentially contaminated items (trash, tissues, etc.) should wear gloves.
- Workers should be reminded to wash their hands after using cleaning products or touching contaminated surfaces or items.

What should I tell employees who have flu-like symptoms?

Employees with flu-like symptoms, such as fever (temperature at or above 100.4 degrees Fahrenheit) and cough, should stay home until at least 24 hours after their symptoms resolve. Anyone with *severe* symptoms should seek health care and treatment immediately.

In adults, symptoms that warrant emergency medical attention include:

- Rapid breathing, difficulty breathing, or shortness of breath
- Pain or pressure in the chest or abdomen
- Sudden dizziness
- Confusion
- Severe or persistent vomiting

- Bluish skin color

Those with mild flu-like illness should *not* go to the emergency room or hospital. Those with flu-like illness who have underlying conditions should call a doctor to get treatment.

Should I have medications on hand for employees?

No. The antiviral medicines Tamiflu® (oseltamivir) and Relenza® (zanamivir) can help alleviate H1N1 flu symptoms in those with severe illness or risk factors for complications from influenza. Most influenza lasts only a few days, and most people recover completely without medication, so most patients should use it only if their doctor recommends it. Stockpiling medication could prevent it from getting to the people who need it the most.

How long should employees with influenza-like illness remain home from work?

The Health Department recommends that people stay home until they have been free of symptoms for 24 hours. If appropriate for the job, employers might consider having telecommuting options for those who need to stay home. Instructions on measures to reduce the risk of transmission of influenza in the home are available on the Health Department website and can be given to sick employees (see www.nyc.gov/html/doh/downloads/pdf/cd/cd-h1n1flu-homeisolation-new.pdf).

Should employees with influenza-like symptoms get tested when they get sick or before returning to work?

No. There is no need for people with mild flu symptoms to be tested for flu or for the H1N1 virus. Testing does not affect treatment or medical advice. Employees who are feeling well can return to work 24 hours after symptoms resolve. There is no need to test them for an absence of influenza.

Should employees who have traveled to Mexico be excluded from work?

No. Travelers returning to New York City from an area of the world affected by the H1N1 influenza do *not* need to be excluded from work if they are feeling well (no fever or cough).

Should companies restrict business travel to prevent H1N1 influenza?

It is not necessary to restrict business travel at this time. The Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) has downgraded its recommendation against travel to Mexico to a Travel Health Precaution. For more information see www.cdc.gov/travel/content/travel-health-precaution/novel-h1n1-flu-mexico.aspx.

What information should I share with employees?

By promoting good hygiene and infection-control practices, you can help keep your workforce healthy. Employers can use websites, hotlines and posters to inform workers about the symptoms and spread of influenza and to encourage good hygiene. Early and active communication can also help manage fear and anxiety during an outbreak. Employers should be wary of rumors about H1N1 (SO) infection. For timely information online concerning H1N1 influenza, visit the websites of the New York City Health Department (www.nyc.gov/health), the CDC (<http://cdc.gov/h1n1flu/>) or the U.S. Department of Health & Human Services (www.pandemicflu.gov).

When should I close down my office?

Thus far there has been no need for U.S. employers to close down businesses or offices to prevent the spread of H1N1 influenza.

How can I plan ahead for a pandemic?

Think about how you would run your business if a large share of your workforce was absent. Consider the impact that school closures could have and make contingency plans, such as allowing telecommuting or staggered shifts. You should also review your sick-leave policies and consider how they would affect employees who become ill. For more information on how businesses can plan for large disease outbreaks, visit www.pandemicflu.gov/plan/workplaceplanning/index.html.

How can employees handle stress about H1N1 influenza?

Thinking about the outbreak of the H1N1 influenza in New York City may be stressful for some individuals. Such a reaction is normal. People who feel overwhelmed by stress should consider seeking professional help or calling 800-LIFENET, a 24-hour, 7-day-a-week crisis hotline. LifeNet is staffed by mental-health professionals who speak a variety of languages.

- English: 800-LIFENET (800-543-3638)
- Spanish: 877-AYUDESE (877-298-33730)
- Asian languages: 877-990-8585
- Deaf/Hearing Impaired (TTY): 212-982-5284 or www.mhaofnyc.org.

This guidance is based on our current understanding of H1N1 influenza and will be updated as new information is available; refer to the DOHMH website at www.nyc.gov/health for the latest developments.

Where should I go for more information?

To get more information on H1N1 virus visit the Department of Health website at www.nyc.gov/health or call 311.

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