

**What Workers Need to Know About Pandemic Flu**

**Basic Facts About Pandemic Flu and the H1N1  
(Swine) Flu**

**What is pandemic flu?**

Pandemic flu is a new type of flu virus that spreads quickly and easily around the world. We have no way to fight off this new type of virus, because we have not built up any resistance (immunity) to it. Because no one has any immunity to this new flu virus, everyone is at risk of becoming infected and suffering serious illness or death.

Pandemic flu will have a huge impact on our nation and workplaces. Our hospitals will be too busy to treat everyone who needs help. The number of people who miss work will go up. Our economy will slow down.

Our normal way of life will change because we will have to limit contact between people to keep the virus from spreading. For example, schools and businesses could close, public events could be cancelled, and there could be limits put on travel.

**The H1N1 (swine) flu has now infected people in the United States and in many other countries. The World Health Organization has declared it a full blown pandemic.**

**This fact sheet provides basic information on the H1N1 flu and suggests what individuals can do to best protect themselves.**

**However, it is the employer's responsibility to protect their employees at work. Employers need to put infection control measures and emergency plans into place at work NOW, so that workers are fully protected. These measures are explained in factsheets #2 – #5.**

## **What is the difference between the seasonal flu and H1N1 flu?**

### **Seasonal (Common) Flu**

Seasonal flu spreads from person to person and is a common sickness every winter. Seasonal flu causes fever, runny nose, sore throat, muscle pain and coughing. The people most at risk are young children, older people, and people with any health condition that weakens the immune system.

Seasonal flu can usually be prevented by a vaccine (flu shot) that you can get each year. Many people can fight off the common flu because over time, you can build up some immunity to help protect you. There are some medicines that can help treat people with seasonal flu.

Each year, over 200,000 people in the United States end up in the hospital and about 36,000 people die from problems related to seasonal flu.

### **H1N1 Flu**

In spring 2009, an H1N1 flu outbreak began in Mexico. The flu spreads easily from person to person. Many states in the U.S. have now reported cases of the infection in humans, and cases have been reported internationally as well. An updated case count of confirmed infections in the United States is kept at <http://www.cdc.gov/h1n1flu>.

The H1N1 flu is a new type of flu virus, so no one has any immunity. Even if you got a seasonal flu shot this year, it will provide no protection against the H1N1 flu. And healthy individuals appear to be as much at risk, or more, of contracting the flu as anyone else (in comparison to the seasonal flu). There is no vaccine at the present time and development of a vaccine will take at least 6 months.

We do not yet know how serious the H1N1 infection will be. Some cases have been mild; some have been more severe. It is possible that the virus will change (mutate) over time and become more deadly. It is too soon to tell how much this virus will spread, how fast it will spread, or how mild or severe cases of the flu will be. A pandemic can take months or years to run its course.

## **What are the symptoms of H1N1 flu?**

The symptoms of H1N1 flu are similar to the symptoms of regular flu and include fever, cough, sore throat, runny nose, body aches, headache, chills and fatigue. Symptoms can also include nausea, diarrhea and vomiting. Nearly all persons with flu will have at least two of these symptoms. Like seasonal flu, H1N1 flu may cause a worsening of underlying chronic medical conditions.

## **How does H1N1 flu spread?**

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/particles 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.

## **During what time period can an infected person spread H1N1 flu to others?**

People with H1N1 influenza virus infection are potentially contagious from the day before the start of symptoms until they are no longer symptomatic, and possibly for up to 7 days following the start of symptoms. Children, especially younger children, might be contagious for longer periods.

## What can you, as an individual, do to protect yourself from getting the H1N1 flu?

There is no vaccine available now to protect against H1N1 flu and there may not be one available for at least 6 months, if at all.

There are some everyday actions you can take to protect your health:

- Cover your nose and mouth with a tissue when you cough or sneeze. Throw the tissue in the trash after you use it. If you do not have a tissue, cover your cough or sneeze with your hand. Then, clean your hands as noted below.
- Wash your hands often (especially after sneezing, coughing or wiping your nose; before handling or eating food; after using the toilet; and whenever your hands are dirty). Wash with soap and warm water for 20 seconds. When soap and water are not available, use alcohol-based disposable hand wipes or gel sanitizers. You can find them in most supermarkets and drugstores. If using gel, rub your hands until the gel is dry. The gel does not need water to work.
- Avoid touching your eyes, nose or mouth.
- Try to avoid close contact with sick people.

The only personal protective equipment that may protect you from breathing in the virus is a “particulate filtering respirator” rated “N95” or higher. There are a number of different types of respirators. Some are disposable and can be used once and then must be thrown away (they cannot be cleaned and reused). These can be purchased in some stores (like drugstores) or on the internet. However, in order for a respirator to be an effective protection, it must be “fit-tested” on you to make sure the respirator fits and seals tightly around the face. OSHA requires that any time employees have to use a respirator, their employer must first do fit-testing (and provide training). Note: **Surgical masks are not respirators** (although they may look similar to some respirators). **They will not protect you from breathing in the small flu droplets/particles.** However, there is some evidence that surgical masks may provide limited protection from another way infection can

happen – from large droplets that come from a close-by infected person who coughs or sneezes on you.

## **What should you do if you get sick?**

If you are sick and it is possible that it is influenza, **you should stay home from work or school** for 7 days after the onset of illness or at least 24 hours after symptoms have ended.

You should avoid contact with other people as much as possible to keep from spreading your illness to others.

Note: If you get the flu, you may be covered under the protections of the Family and Medical Leave Act, which gives you the right to time off from work (unpaid) and prohibits an employer from discriminating against you for your absenteeism for the time off. There may also be a state law which gives you similar or better protections. If you catch the flu at work, you may be eligible for workers' compensation benefits (which include paid time off and paid medical care). Also, check your union contract for provisions for workers who are ill.

## **Should you get medical attention if you get sick?**

If you become ill with flu-like symptoms, including fever, body aches, runny nose, sore throat, nausea, or vomiting or diarrhea, you should contact your health care provider. You should contact your healthcare provider by telephone or other remote means before seeking care at a clinic, physician's office, or hospital. Persons who have difficulty breathing or shortness of breath or are severely ill should seek immediate medical attention.

Your health care provider will determine whether influenza testing and treatment is needed. Health care providers have a test available that tells whether you have the H1N1 flu. Some prescription antiviral medications (such as oseltamivir [Tamiflu] or zanamivir [Relenza]) have been shown to be effective in treating this flu. These drugs work best if given within 2 days of becoming ill, but may be given later if illness is severe or for those at a high risk for complications.

Don't forget – if you leave the house to seek medical care, cover your coughs and sneezes with a tissue.

## **What should you do if a member of your household becomes ill with the flu?**

First, call your health care provider for advice and possible testing and treatment.

Anyone who develops fever with either cough or sore throat should stay home for 7 days after the onset of illness or at least 24 hours after symptoms have ended, whichever is longer.

It is important that you keep sick children home from child care, school, or public places like libraries or malls.

The ill person should be kept away from others in the home as much as possible (for example, in a separate bedroom with a separate bathroom). In addition, if possible, only one adult in the home should take care of the ill person (pregnant women should not care for ill persons). Do not have any visitors to your home.

Caregivers who must have close contact with a person who is infected should spend the least amount of time possible in close contact. It is advisable for a caregiver to wear an N-95 disposable respirator during close contact (but remember that these are not completely protective, especially if the person wearing it has not been fit-tested).

If possible, maintain good ventilation in shared household areas.

Everyone in the household should be told and follow the information noted above about good personal hygiene (frequent hand washing, covering nose and mouth with tissue when sneeze or cough).

Note: If your spouse, child or parent gets the flu, you may be covered under the protections of the Family and Medical Leave Act, which gives you the right to time off (unpaid) to care for them and prohibits an employer from discriminating against for your absenteeism for the time off. There may also be a state law which gives you similar or better protections. And check your union contract for family leave benefits.

## **How will our workplaces be affected by pandemic flu?**

Workers who have close and frequent contact with the public are more likely to get the H1N1 virus. Health care workers and those who respond to an emergency are in the most danger of getting the virus.

The number of people missing work could reach as high as 40% to 60%. Workers could be absent from work because they are sick, caring for a family member who is sick, or taking care of children when schools are closed.

It is very important that employers plan and prepare for pandemic flu **NOW by putting infection control measures and emergency plans into place at work**. Every employer should have a plan to prevent the spread of the flu and teach workers about the plan.

**Factsheets #2 - #5 include specific information about these measures and what unions can do to ensure employers implement them.**

This factsheet was produced by the Labor Safety and Health Training Project, National Labor College, funded in whole or in part with federal funds the Occupational Safety and Health Administration, U.S. Department of Labor, under grants numbers 46C0-HT06 and SH-17039-08-60-F-24. These materials do not necessarily reflect the views or policies of the U.S. Department of Labor, nor does mention of trade names, commercial products, or organizations imply endorsement by the U.S. Government.