

PUBLICATION

DHHS Declares Public Health Emergency and Recommends Employer Precautions

April 29, 2009

The Department of Health and Human Services (DHHS) has issued a formal declaration of public health emergency in response to recent human infections with a newly discovered swine influenza A ("swine flu") virus. To date, there have been confirmed cases of swine flu in at least five states, while the World Health Organization has reported confirmed cases in several other countries around the world. DHHS Secretary Charles Johnson has stated that "the declaration allows us the flexibility, while we learn more about the virus and its impact in the United States, to take additional steps to fully mobilize our prevention, treatment and mitigation capabilities should those actions become necessary."

Swine flu is a respiratory disease of pigs caused by Type A influenza. Swine flu viruses do not normally infect humans; however, human infections with swine flu do occur, and cases of human-to-human spread of swine flu viruses have been reported. The symptoms of swine flu in people are similar to the symptoms of regular human seasonal flu and include fever, cough, sore throat, lack of appetite, lethargy, body aches, diarrhea, vomiting, chills and fatigue.

In order to reduce the risk of employees becoming infected during an outbreak of any type of influenza, employers should educate and train employees in proper hand hygiene, cough etiquette and social distancing controls. Specifically, the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) recommend the following basic hygiene and social distancing precautions for the workplace:

- Employees should cover their noses and mouths with a tissue when they cough or sneeze. Employers should provide customers, employees and the public with tissues, trash receptacles and a place to wash or disinfect their hands.
- Employees should wash hands often with soap and water, or use alcohol-based hand cleaners.
- Employees should avoid touching their eyes, noses or mouths.
- Employers should encourage sick employees to stay home.
- Employees should avoid close contact with their coworkers and customers (maintain a separation of at least six feet).
- Employers should keep work surfaces, telephones, computer equipment and other frequently touched surfaces and office equipment clean. Discourage employees from using other employees' phones, desks, offices or other work tools and equipment.
- Use email, phones and text messages to communicate with each other. When meetings are necessary, avoid close contact and assure that there is proper ventilation in the meeting room.
- Employees should practice good health habits (e.g., get plenty of sleep, be physically active, manage stress, drink plenty of fluids, and eat nutritious foods).

In the event of an influenza pandemic (i.e., a global outbreak that affects multiple areas of the United States and occurs in waves for an extended period of time), workplaces are likely to experience substantial absenteeism (up to 40% of workforce) and significant interruptions in supply and delivery of goods. **Although there is currently no pandemic, the Occupational Safety and Health Administration has developed pandemic influenza planning guidelines based upon traditional infection control and industrial hygiene**

practices. Helpful, up to date information, guidelines and checklists are available for employers at www.pandemicflu.gov.