

PUBLICATION

H1N1 Is Coming Back! Are You Prepared?

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The influenza A (H1N1) virus, or “swine flu,” has emerged as a highly-contagious illness with the capacity to incapacitate its victims for 3-7 days or more. Since its outbreak, many scientific models project that H1N1 is likely to reemerge this fall as a more easily transmitted and/or more serious virus, and recent statistics predict as many as half of all Americans will be affected.

While a flu vaccine is expected to be available this fall, businesses are already taking steps to help prevent the likelihood of spreading swine flu in the workplace. In addition to reminding individuals exercise basic hygiene and instructing cleaning staff to disinfect common surfaces, companies are well advised to instruct employees who are experiencing flu-like symptoms to report their condition to their supervisors and then stay home. Additional steps include:

- Review your company's leave and telecommuting policies and adjust them, if necessary, to encourage employees to stay at home if they or a close family member are experiencing flu-like symptoms;
- Remember that such absences, if experienced by eligible employees, may count as protected leave under the FMLA or related state law;
- Discontinue nonessential travel to Mexico and other locations the CDC identifies as having high illness transmission rates;
- If you have an Employee Assistance Program, remind employees that these services are available to help them cope with additional stress that might result from the swine flu outbreak; and
- Review the websites of the CDC and the Occupational Safety and Health Administration daily for updates on steps to take during the outbreak.

OSHA recommends that employers develop pandemic flu plans specifically tailored to the needs of their worksites.