

Federal Guidelines for Dealing with Upcoming Flu

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Recently, the U.S. Occupational Safety and Health Administration (OSHA) issued a press release advising employers that several federal departments had issued new guidance for businesses as to how to plan for and respond to the upcoming flu season.

That guidance, prepared by the U.S. Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC), concerns not only the impact that seasonal flu normally has upon employees and their employers' business operations but also the impact that 2009 H1N1 influenza could have this fall and winter on businesses.

Employers are advised by CDC to:

- Encourage employees with flu-like symptoms or illness to stay home and, if indicated, seek appropriate medical care;
- Encourage frequent hand washing and routine cleaning of commonly touched surfaces;
- Operate with reduced staffing when necessary; and
- Possibly having employees who are at higher risk of serious medical complications from infection work from home.

According to the press release, "[i]t is not known whether the 2009 H1N1 influenza virus will cause more illness or more severe illness in the coming months, but the CDC recommends that everyone be prepared for influenza."

Because of the serious health risks, businesses are encouraged to develop and implement plans that can reduce the spread of flu and to encourage employees to obtain a seasonal flu vaccination as well as a H1N1 vaccination when they become available, or even offer the seasonal flu vaccine in the workplace.

CDC also suggests that employers be flexible and allow employees with ill family members or children at home due to a school closure to work from home.

It is also suggested that employers cancel non-essential face-to-face meetings and travel, and space employees farther apart in the workplace.

OSHA's guidance on a possible flu pandemic can be found at: http://www.osha.gov/Publications/influenza_pandemic.html. Another federal government website dealing with influenza can be accessed at: <http://www.pandemicflu.gov/index.html>. ▲

Coming out of Washington

Here's a heads up on a couple of new rules that OSHA is updating — on protective equipment and acetylene standards. Also, you may want to sign up for the free electronic newsletter the U.S. Department of Labor has started. See below.

- OSHA recently published a final rule revising the personal protective equipment standards (for general industry and others) pertaining to eye- and face-protective devices and also head- and foot- protection. For information on the new rule go to the "Federal Register," Sept. 9, 2009, pages 46350-46361. In essence, OSHA is updating its regulations to include more recent editions of the national consensus standards. In addition, OSHA will require safety shoes to comply with a specific American National Standards Institute (ANSI) standard; and it includes a provision to require filter lenses and plates in eye-protective equipment to meet a test to guard against radiant energy. The final rule will become effective Oct. 9, 2009.

- OSHA is proposing to revise its acetylene standard by updating its references to current acetylene industry work practices. For information on this rule, go to the "Federal Register," Aug. 11, 2009, pages 40441-40447, in which OSHA has published its final rule. This is a continuation of OSHA's ongoing effort to update references to standards developing organizations (SDO) standards.

- The U.S. Department of Labor has started an electronic newsletter to help everyone keep abreast

Due to serious health risks from H1N1 flu, businesses are urged to develop and carry out plans that can reduce its spread.