

OCWR Fast Facts

Flu Prevention



Thousands of people are hospitalized and die from flu-related illnesses each year. Between 5 and 20 percent of Americans get the flu each year, and up to 75 percent of employees miss workdays when experiencing the flu or flu-like illnesses.

Influenza, or the flu, is a contagious respiratory illness caused by a virus. While most people who get the flu will recover relatively quickly, some may develop complications that can be life threatening. Individuals who are at high risk for complications include people aged 65 years and older, children younger than 5 years of age, pregnant women, and people with chronic medical conditions, such as asthma, diabetes, or heart disease.

Common Flu Symptoms

- Fever or chills
- Cough
- Sore throat
- Runny nose
- Muscle, head, or body aches
- Fatigue
- Vomiting
- Diarrhea

Prevention

All employees should follow basic hygiene practices to prevent illness. Many infectious diseases can be spread by hands to the nose or eyes, where they can enter the body. Avoid touching your eyes, nose, and mouth. Handwashing is the most effective way to reduce exposure to germs. Hand sanitizers can be used when soap is unavailable.

Flu vaccines are available for people aged 6 months and older during the flu season. All individuals should practice healthy habits (e.g., get plenty of sleep, manage stress, and eat nutritious foods) to reduce their risk of becoming ill.

Employers can establish a variety of internal policies and practices to protect employees and constituents, including:

- Encouraging flu shots
- Providing hand sanitizer dispensers
- Establishing work policies or physical barriers that minimize contact between employees and the public
- Using personal protective equipment such as gloves, face shields, or surgical masks, if appropriate
- Wiping down high touch areas such as telephones, desks, water fountain handles, microwave door handles, and computer keyboards

What if an employee is sick?

Employees should not come to work if they are sick. If they do come to work, they should be sent home. If employees become ill at work, they should do the following:

- Cover their mouth and nose with a tissue when coughing or sneezing
- Put used tissues in a wastebasket
- Clean their hands with soap and water or an alcohol-based hand gel immediately after coughing or sneezing
- Avoid close contact with coworkers
- Clean and disinfect heavily used spaces and frequently touched surfaces

Pandemic flu

An influenza pandemic occurs when a new influenza virus emerges globally with little or no immunity in the human population, similar to the COVID-19 pandemic. A pandemic flu outbreak can impact employee and workplace operations. Planning for this type of nontraditional emergency is an important part of ensuring the health and safety of employees and continuity of operations in the event of an outbreak.

The information provided below can be useful for addressing a pandemic flu event or interruptions to normal workplace operations due to regular seasonal flu outbreaks.



Step 1 – Know Your Risk

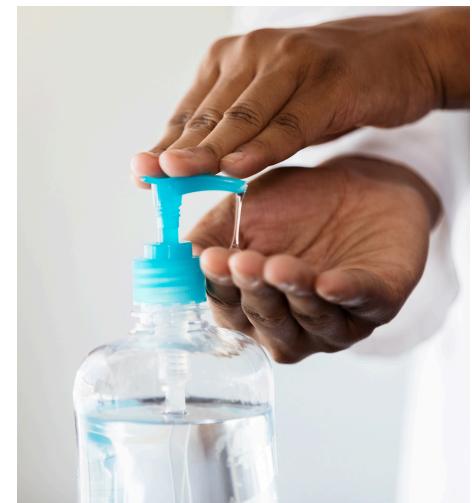
- Very High Exposure Risk – High potential of exposure to high concentrations of sources of pandemic influenza during specific medical or laboratory procedures
- High Exposure Risk – High potential for exposure to known or suspected sources of virus
- Medium Exposure Risk – Frequent contact with known or suspected sources of virus (e.g., coworkers, general public, outpatients, schoolchildren)
- Low Exposure Risk – Minimal contact with people known to be infected with virus or the public

Step 2 – Develop a Plan

- Identify essential functions and personnel.
- Anticipate disruption in daily operations.
- Prepare succession strategy in case of absenteeism. Train more than one employee on each job function.
- Evaluate computer/server requirements and upkeep to support teleworking.
- Ensure the safety and health of employees at work.
- Plan for the continuation of payroll, benefit, and other human resource functions.
- Prepare for interrupted supply delivery.

Step 3 – Sustain the Workplace During an Outbreak

- Communicate with appropriate organizations (e.g., legislative branch leadership) regarding the status of the pandemic.
- Consider permitting/encouraging telecommuting.
- Encourage ill employees to stay home, and send employees home early if they develop flu-like symptoms while at work.
- Provide disinfectant, cleaning materials, soap, alcohol-based hand sanitizers, and disposable wipes.
- Routinely clean objects and surfaces (e.g., conference room tables, keyboards, doorknobs, phones) to remove germs.



Sources:

1. "Hazard Recognition," Occupational Safety and Health Administration, accessed January 13, 2026, <https://www.osha.gov/coronavirus/hazards>.
2. "Learn About Flu," American Lung Association, last updated October 27, 2025, <https://www.lung.org/lung-health-diseases/lung-disease-lookup/influenza/learn-about-influenza>.
3. "Agency Preparations," U.S. Office of Personnel Management, accessed January 9, 2026, <https://www.opm.gov/policy-data-oversight/pandemic-information/agency-preparations>.



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