

SMART STRATEGIES FOR FLU PREVENTION



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The 2017-18 flu season ranked as the deadliest in the United States in more than four decades, with an estimated 80,000 people dying of the flu and its complications, according to the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC).

Flu activity started to increase in November before peaking in January and February. Overall, a record-breaking 900,000 people in the U.S. were hospitalized due to the flu, CDC estimates show.

While the forecast for 2018-19 calls for a less severe flu season, businesses still need to prepare and protect their employees, because the flu packs a big punch when it comes to workplace productivity. **On average, the flu causes U.S. employees to miss about 17 million workdays, at a cost of \$7 billion per year in sick days and lost productivity.**

Emergency preparedness managers in particular play a vital role in helping to prevent the spread of flu in organizations and preserve productivity during flu season.

By following practical flu prevention tips for businesses, you can help protect employees' health while reducing absenteeism and health care costs across your organization.



Flu Shots: Your Best Defense In The Fight Against Influenza

Vaccination is the best way to protect against the flu and its related complications. The CDC recommends that everyone 6 months and older get a flu vaccine every season. The only exception is for people with severe, life-threatening allergies to the flu vaccine or any ingredient in the vaccine, those undergoing chemo or whose doctors have advised against it.

An annual vaccine is necessary because it protects against the viruses that research indicates will be most common during the upcoming season. **Influenza strains change, and vaccine effectiveness wears off over time, so people should get vaccinated every year.**

Since it takes about two weeks to build immunity, it's best to get vaccinated in the fall, before the flu season starts to peak. In North America, the flu season can last through May, and it's important to get protected for this large period of time.

Getting a vaccination does not guarantee you'll avoid the flu. This year's flu vaccine has a predicted efficacy rate of about 20 percent, according to one study. While that might not sound impressive, consider the 900,000 estimated flu-related hospitalizations last season – reducing risk by even 20 percent can make a big difference in lowering workplace absenteeism.

A recent study by Cal Poly San Luis Obispo economist Corey White found that across the U.S. population, "a one percentage point increase in the vaccination rate for one year would result in 1,134 fewer deaths and 8.9 million fewer work hours lost in expectation."

In addition to reducing your risk of getting the flu, you subsequently reduce other people's exposure, including those who are allergic to the flu vaccine and children younger than 6 months old. Also, if you do get the flu despite receiving a vaccine, you're more likely to experience a milder flu and be less sick than if you didn't receive a shot.

Even with these benefits, a record-low percentage of U.S. adults received a flu vaccine last year, with data from the CDC showing only about 37% of people ages 18 to 65 received flu shots. It's the lowest percentage since the CDC started recording official data in 2009-10.



Businesses can play a pivotal role in encouraging more people to get vaccinated. Consider these strategies to help boost vaccination rates throughout your organization:

- **Host a flu shot clinic:**
Make it convenient for your employees to get vaccinated by offering flu shots on site at work. If you don't have an on-site medical team, find an agency to work the flu shot clinic. Be sure to regularly promote the clinic in advance so employees are aware.
- **Highlight where to get vaccinated off site:**
If you're not hosting a flu shot clinic, put together a list of places where employees can get vaccinated. Work with public health agencies and local pharmacists to compile the information. This is especially helpful later in the flu season, when supplies may dwindle. If you know vaccinations are still available in your area, remind employees that it's not too late to get protected. Visit vaccinefinder.org to find locations in your area that still have the vaccine.
- **Reward and incentivize employees:**
Rewards can help boost participation in wellness efforts. Think about ways to incentivize people to get vaccinated, such as holding a contest to see which department or location achieves the highest vaccination rate, or providing a subsidy for employees who receive a flu shot and prove proof of vaccination.

For people who are skittish about getting shots, a nasal spray vaccine is available this season. The CDC has approved its use for non-pregnant individuals ages 2 through 49.

Can The Flu Vaccine Give You The Flu?

Flu vaccines cannot cause flu illness. As the CDC explains, flu shots are made in two ways:

- 1) Using flu viruses that have been "inactivated" (killed) and therefore aren't infectious
- 2) Using a single gene from the flu virus (as opposed to the full virus) to produce an immune response without causing infection

Some people have mild reactions to the flu vaccine, such as soreness or tenderness where the shot was given. Low-grade fever, muscle aches and headaches also may occur soon after the shot and last for one to two days.

Since the flu is a serious disease, getting vaccinated is the right choice despite the risk of the above short-term reactions.



7 Flu Prevention Tips To Protect Your Business And Employees

Encouraging employees to get a flu vaccination should be your first line of defense, but you still need to prepare for preventing the spread of flu. Start by looking at the impact the flu had across your organization last season. Could you make some changes to be better prepared this season?

Next, use these tips to help preserve productivity and a healthier workplace environment for everyone:

Ask Employees To Stay Home When They're Sick

Most flu viruses are passed from person to person through droplets when someone with the flu coughs, sneezes or talks. To prevent the flu from spreading across your workplace, it's critical people stay home when they're sick.

Update your sick policy so it's clear that employees should not come to work if they're sick, and then make sure you're enforcing that policy. Some employees will insist on coming to the office, so management must be empowered to send sick employees home.

Implement A Remote Working Policy

A remote working policy is especially helpful for employees who are parents and need to stay home with a sick child. Today's technology allows many tasks to be accomplished remotely, particularly if people have web-based access to work files and the ability to communicate via video or audio conferencing.

Your organization's leadership should develop a policy that determines what roles and kinds of projects are best suited for remote working. For instance, tasks like writing a white paper or doing competitor research are ideal.

3 Carefully Examine Family Leave And Time Off Policies

Some people feel pressure to come to work when they're sick because they don't want to use their time off. This is often the case if people have paid time off but no designated sick days.

During a severe flu season, or if the flu is hitting your organization hard, consider revising your family leave and time off policies. For example, you might reset people's time off so they're better able to take care of themselves. Promoting that culture of wellness benefits the business and employees in the long run.

4 Make Modifications To Physical Office Space

Some organizations aren't a good fit for remote working. For instances, manufacturing companies need people working on the plant floor.

In these cases, look for ways to modify your physical space to reduce the likelihood of person-to-person infections, such as implementing social distancing so employees aren't working as close to each other and spreading germs.

5 Stock Up On Sanitizer, Cleaning Supplies And Masks

Set up hand-sanitizer stations throughout the office. While using hand sanitizers isn't as effective as washing your hands with soap and water, these stations serve as a good reminder about the importance of hygiene. They're helpful to have where employees eat and outside of restrooms, so people can sanitize after touching the door.

It's always a good idea to regularly disinfect surfaces, and that's especially true during flu season. Stock up on cleaning supplies you'll need so you don't run out. Also, for sick employees who need to be at the office, have medical paper face masks that loop over their ears to restrict the spread of germs.



6 Share Educational Materials

Consistently remind employees that they can help prevent the spread of flu. Post educational materials around the office about the symptoms to look out for and what to do when sick. Put up signs in bathrooms to reinforce the importance of regular handwashing, coughing into your elbow instead of your hand and keeping your hands off your face.

Public health departments should be able to provide some of these materials. The CDC has a [comprehensive collection of flu prevention information](#) on its website.

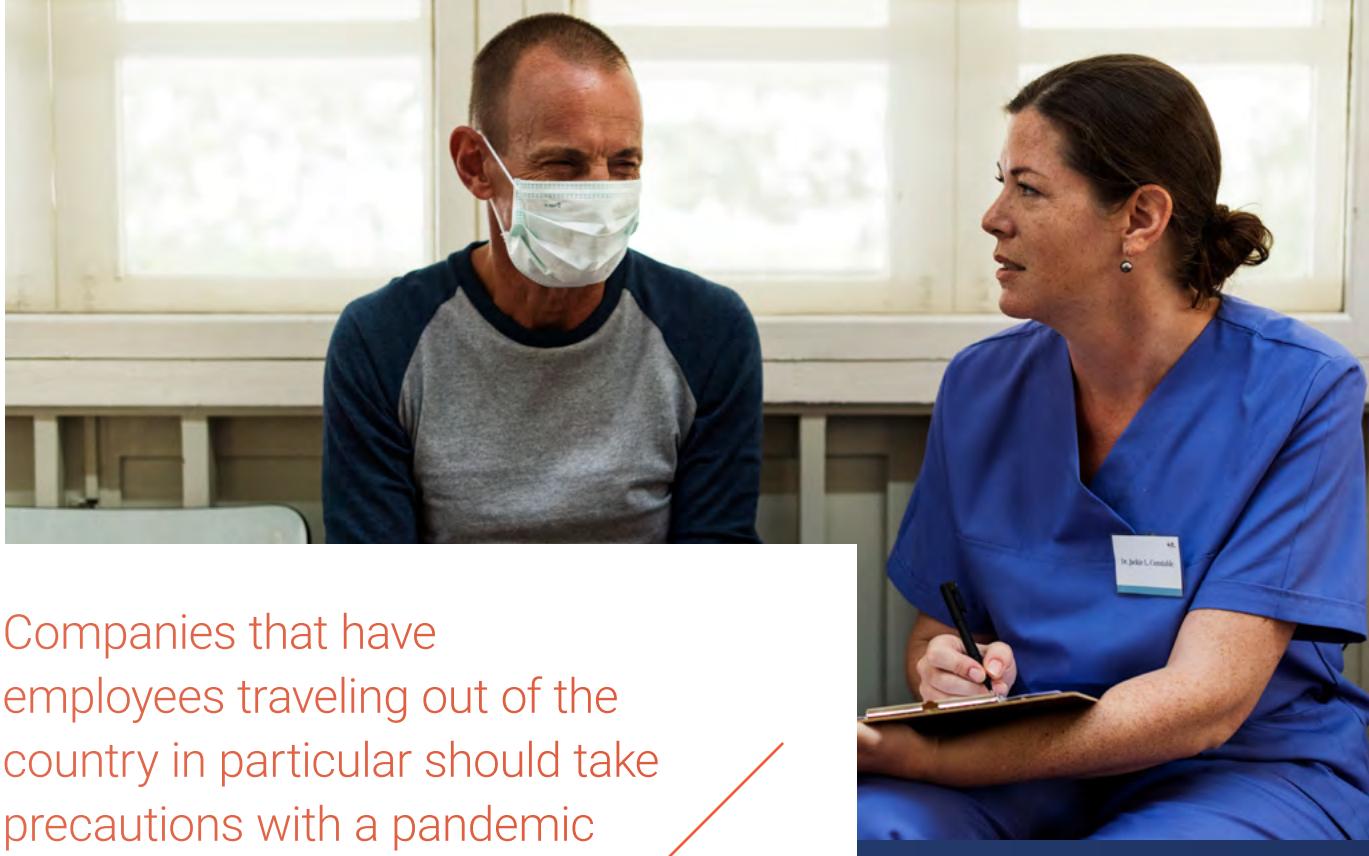
7 Track Sick Days That Employees Are Taking

It's important to know if there's a spike in absenteeism due to the flu. To keep tabs on how the flu is affecting your organization and prevent further spreading, monitor employee absences.

Without getting too personal, ask employees who are taking a sick day to specify the reason. Are they injured? Do they have the common cold? Or is it the seasonal flu that's keeping them home? Tracking data on why people are out sick helps your organization make better decisions and lessen the impact in future years.

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Companies that have employees traveling out of the country in particular should take precautions with a pandemic preparedness program.



How The Flu Relates To Pandemics: Is Your Business Prepared?

A pandemic is the worldwide spread of a new disease, whereas an epidemic is confined to one specific geographic region. The flu is one of the most well-known causes of both pandemics and epidemics.

As the World Health Organization explains, “An influenza pandemic occurs when a new influenza virus emerges and spreads around the world, and most people do not have immunity.”

From early 2009 to 2010, the H1N1 flu pandemic (also called swine flu) had a death toll of 284,000, according to estimates from a CDC research team. The novel influenza A (H1N1) virus was first detected in the United States before spreading across the world.

About 90 years earlier, the Spanish Flu of 1918 killed an estimated 50 million people worldwide, including many healthy young adults with strong immune systems. This unusually deadly influenza epidemic spread quickly, killing 3 to 5 percent of the world’s population over a two-year period.

Since pandemics pose such a big threat, your organization needs a plan for keeping employees safe and reducing the potential impact on business continuity. Companies that have employees traveling out of the country in particular should take precautions with a pandemic preparedness program that includes:

Working with an infectious disease clinic:

Experts at such clinics can help your employees understand the specific current threats and concerns (like yellow fever or malaria) in the regions they're traveling to.

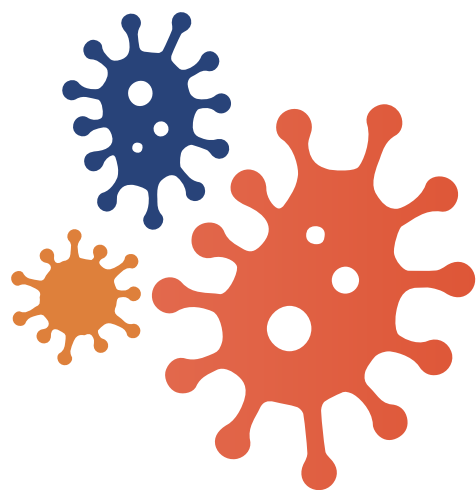
Developing a protocol for when people return home:

Decide how employees should monitor their health after the trip. Should they stay home for a few days? Do they need to check their temperature for a certain amount of time and report an elevated temperature? An infectious disease doctor can assist your organization in creating these protocols.

Considering plans for holding meetings remotely:

Sometimes the risk of traveling to certain parts of the world is too dangerous. For those situations, think about backup plans, such as holding meetings via remote conferencing tools instead of in-person.

Employees who travel for work will feel more valued if they're getting support that goes beyond taking the necessary steps to get their visa. They want to feel confident about returning home healthy.





While you can't control the overall severity of the flu season or the effectiveness of the flu vaccine, you can help prevent the spread of the flu in your organization.

Make Flu Prevention A Priority For Your Organization

For the sake of employee health and business productivity, flu prevention should be a key focus at all companies. The potential business impact is too big to ignore.

While you can't control the overall severity of the flu season or the effectiveness of the flu vaccine, you can help prevent the spread of the flu in your organization. Educating employees about the flu and how to protect themselves can make a big difference.

This year, don't make the mistake of not taking the flu seriously. Prepare now and help protect your employees before the flu season peaks.



Want to learn more about helping your organization prepare for flu season?

Watch our webinar featuring this guide's author, Meg Nash, MPH.

[Watch The Webinar](#)

About Meg Nash, MPH



Meg Nash is a seasoned business continuity professional with a comprehensive background in emergency response, disaster preparedness and public health. She has worked with businesses to implement continuity plans for more than 10 years and has more than 20 years of experience in emergency management and response.

Meg is a certified FEMA instructor, and a highly rated speaker and presenter. She holds a Master of Public Health and graduate certificate in emergency management and public health, both from George Washington University.



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