

Pandemic Influenza Basics

By: Jennifer E. Morgan RN, COHN, Michele I. Willis RN, BSN, COHN-S

There is growing concern about the threat of bird flu or a pandemic flu. Influenza pandemics are rare, but have occurred in the past. The most recent pandemic was the Hong Kong flu in 1968. “Bird flu” or “avian flu” is caused by influenza viruses H5N1 that occur naturally among wild birds. The H5N1 variant is deadly to domestic fowl and can rarely be transmitted from birds to humans but is not transmitted human to human. There is no human immunity and no vaccine is currently available. Seasonal flu is a respiratory illness caused by different strains of the influenza virus that can be transmitted person to person. Most people have some immunity to the seasonal flu viruses and a vaccine is available. Pandemic flu is caused by a new virus strain. This virulent human flu strain causes a global outbreak or pandemic of serious illness. Because there is little natural immunity, the disease can spread easily from person to person. There is no pandemic flu currently.

It is not known whether there will be a pandemic flu outbreak but we need to know the available measures to fight a pandemic flu, this includes vaccines, specific antiviral medications and infection control practices. Vaccinations and antiviral medications availability may be delayed or limited. Businesses can play a key role in protecting employee’s health and safety, in the event of a pandemic flu or seasonal flus. Two effective methods for controlling the spread of flu in the workplace recommended by the CDC are good infection control and social distancing.

A major component of infection control is good hand hygiene. Influenza viruses are spread after respiratory droplets are expelled during coughing or sneezing and land on an object such as countertops, door knobs or even our hands. A person touches the contaminated object and then touches their mouth, nose or eyes introducing the virus into their body. Hands should be washed throughout the day - not just after bathroom use. Hand washing needs to be more than just passing the hands under running water; it involves soap, water, 15 seconds of friction and a paper towel. Waterless hand sanitizers are a viable option and can be placed throughout the place of business to encourage use throughout the day especially where running water is not available.

The concept of social distancing was put forth in the White House document “Implementation Plan for the National Strategy for Pandemic Influenza” it recommends keeping at least 3 feet away from other people to reduce the likelihood of contact with droplets. Unfortunately, it is often not possible to maintain that distance as many jobs require contact with coworkers and the public. One thing a company can do is to develop sick leave policies to encourage sick employees to stay home with provisions in the policy to encourage safe return - to - work practices.

There are several informative resources on the internet that offer planning tools for both businesses and families – www.pandemicflu.gov and www.cdc.gov .

The million dollar question appears to be will we or won’t we have a pandemic flu. We should work to keep a healthy workforce and environment at all times as a company’s most valuable resource is its employees – without them our businesses don’t move forward.

Call Michele Willis at (240)566-3593 to schedule a presentation or flu shots for your employees