



# **Guidance for Businesses in Boston Related to 2009 H1N1 Flu Preparations**

## **What is 2009 H1N1 flu?**

2009 H1N1 flu (originally referred to as “swine flu”) is a new flu virus causing illness in people. In April 2009 this new strain of flu was first reported in the United States. 2009 H1N1 flu has now been found in many other areas of the world.

## **What are the symptoms of 2009 H1N1 flu?**

Symptoms are similar to regular flu and include sudden fever, cough, muscle aches, headache, chills and general weakness. Some people have also had diarrhea and vomiting. These symptoms can range from mild to severe.

## **How does 2009 H1N1 flu spread in people?**

The current strain of 2009 H1N1 flu is able to spread from one person to another. It is thought to spread the same way as regular flu in that the virus is present in the nose and throat and is sprayed into the air when an infected person sneezes, or coughs. People nearby can then breathe in the virus and become infected. Symptoms usually start 1 to 3 days after a person breathes in the virus but can take as long as a week. The virus can also live for a short time on things you touch like doorknobs, phones and toys. After you touch these objects, you can catch the virus when you touch your mouth, nose, or eyes. However, when the wet droplets on these types of objects dry out, the risk of infection is very low.

## **How long can an infected person spread 2009 H1N1 flu to others?**

People are most likely to spread the 2009 H1N1 flu virus from 1 day before their symptoms begin until 4 days after the symptoms begin OR until one day after all their symptoms have resolved – whichever is longer. Children and persons with underlying immune system problems may be able to spread the virus longer.

## **What can employees do to protect themselves against 2009 H1N1 flu?**

- Clean their hands often with soap and water or an alcohol-based hand cleaner.
- Try to stay in good health by getting plenty of sleep, drink plenty of fluids and eat nutritious food.
- Avoid touching their eyes, nose or mouth.
- Avoid close contact with people who are sick, if possible.
- When vaccine is available, get vaccinated against the 2009 H1N1 flu, and the seasonal flu.

## **What can an employee with flu symptoms do to prevent from spreading illness to others?**

- Stay home if they are sick. They should NOT go to work if they are sick with influenza-like symptoms. It is recommended that they stay home for 4 days after symptoms begin or until they have been symptom-free for 24 hours, whichever is longer. Following these recommendations will help keep employees from infecting others and spreading the virus.
- Cover their nose and mouth with a tissue every time they cough or sneeze. Then throw the used tissue in a wastebasket. If they don't have a tissue, sneeze or cough into their upper sleeve. Wash their hands with soap and water, especially after coughing or sneezing. They can also use alcohol-based hand cleaner if soap and water are not available.
- Try to limit contact with others to keep from getting them sick.

**What should a business do when an employee comes to work with symptoms of flu?**

- Place the employee in a room by themselves.
- If the employee needs to go into a common area, he or she should cover coughs/sneezes with a tissue or wear a facemask if available and tolerable.
- Notify the employee's supervisor or employer and send the employee home as soon as possible. Ensure the ill employee stays home for 4 days after symptom onset or until symptom-free for 24 hours, whichever is longer.

**What should an employer do if co-workers may have been exposed to a confirmed case of 2009 H1N1 flu?**

Employers should provide general information on influenza, including 2009 H1N1 flu. Employers should have policies in place that encourage ill employees to stay at home. Advise employees to check with their health care provider about any special care they might need if they are pregnant or have a chronic health condition such as diabetes, heart disease, asthma, or emphysema.

**What should be done for an employee who develops confirmed 2009 H1N1 flu while he or she is traveling?**

- Notify his or her supervisor or employer if an employee becomes ill on travel or temporary assignment.
- If outside the U.S., contact medical consultants or overseas medical assistance companies to assist in finding an appropriate medical provider in that country, if needed. A U.S. consular officer can help locate medical services. Take note that U.S. embassies, consulates, and military facilities do not have the legal authority, capability, and resources to evacuate or to give medications, vaccines, or medical care to private U.S. citizens overseas.
- See 2009 H1N1 flu and Travel on the CDC (Centers for Disease Control) website at [www.cdc.gov](http://www.cdc.gov) for more information for travelers.

**Are there any special considerations for pregnant employees?**

Pregnant women are at higher risk for severe complications from both seasonal influenza and 2009 H1N1 flu. Pregnant women with flu symptoms should contact their health care provider. Pregnant

women who have been in very close contact with an influenza case should also contact their health care provider.

### **What can an employer do to protect employees?**

An employer should encourage sick workers to stay home and away from the workplace, and provide flexible leave policies. Employers should consider providing written guidance on 2009 H1N1 flu policies as appropriate for the language and reading levels of everyone in the workplace. A wide variety of materials are available at the Boston Public Health Commission's web site at [www.bphc.org/flu](http://www.bphc.org/flu). Employers should encourage good infection control practices in the workplace and remind workers about proper handwashing, respiratory hygiene, and cough etiquette while providing sufficient facilities for hand washing and alcohol-based (at least 60%) hand sanitizers (or wipes) in common workplace areas (such as lobbies, corridors, and restrooms) and provide tissues, disinfectants, and disposable towels for employees to clean their work surfaces, as well as appropriate disposal receptacles for use by employees. Employers should also promote flu vaccination to their employees to prevent both seasonal and 2009 H1N1 flu.

### **What can a business do to prepare for 2009 H1N1 flu response?**

A business should identify a workplace coordinator who will be responsible for dealing with 2009 H1N1 flu issues and impact at the workplace. This person should review or develop plans for response. Recommendations for planning, policies, and communication strategies that businesses should consider include:

#### **Planning and Coordination**

- € Plan for the possibility of unscheduled leave that will allow employees who are sick to stay at home to care for themselves and others who are ill with the flu.
- € Implement business continuity plans if there is significant absenteeism in the workplace during an outbreak.
- € Determine who will be responsible for responding to ill individuals in the workplace. This person should review or develop protocols for response to ill individuals.
- € Identify essential employees, essential business functions, and other critical inputs (e.g. raw materials, suppliers, subcontractor services/products, and logistics) required to maintain business operations by location and function should there be disruption during a 2009 H1N1 flu outbreak.
- € Review your plan with regard to increases or decreases in demand for your products and/or services during an outbreak (e.g., the need for hygiene supplies).
- € Ensure that that proper workplace infection control policies are being met.

#### **Policies**

- € Establish policies for flexible worksite (e.g., telecommuting) and flexible work hours (e.g., staggered shifts), if needed.
- € Consider policy allowing 2 hour time off for employees seeking to be vaccinated against the flu.

- € Examine policies for leave and employee compensation and review with managers, supervisors, and employees so they are up-to-date on sick leave policies, leave donation, and employee assistance services that are covered under the different employee sponsored health plans. Leave policies should be flexible and non-punitive.

### **Communication with Employees**

- € Share plans with employees and clearly communicate expectations.
- € Communicate policies for employee access to and availability of health care, mental health, and social services including corporate and community resources.
- € Establish an emergency communications plan. This plan includes identification of key contacts (with back-ups), chain of communications (including suppliers and customers), and processes for tracking and communicating business and employee status.
- € Develop platforms (e.g., hotlines, dedicated websites) for communicating information and actions to employees, vendors, suppliers, and customers inside and outside the worksite in a consistent and timely way, including redundancies in the emergency contact system.
- € Review the BPHC website at [www.bphc.org/flu](http://www.bphc.org/flu) and the CDC website at [www.cdc.gov/h1n1flu](http://www.cdc.gov/h1n1flu) for up-to-date information and communicate recommendations to employees.

*This document contains information for those who have minimal occupational contact with the general public and other coworkers (for example, office employees). The guidance in this document may change as additional information about 2009 H1N1 flu becomes known. This interim guidance is meant to inform and educate management, unions, and employees about appropriate precautions and work practices to minimize the risk of potential employee exposure, illness, and the spread of 2009 H1N1 flu in the workplace through general prevention and preparedness strategies and in the event that a worker becomes ill. Businesses and employers, in general, play a key role in protecting employees' health and safety, as well as in limiting the negative impact of the outbreak on the individual, the community, and the nation's economy.*

**For more information, please contact  
Boston Public Health Commission  
Mayor's Health Line  
617-534-5050 or [www.bphc.org/flu](http://www.bphc.org/flu)**