

Employers and Health Care Professionals Working Together

Employer-supported flu vaccination programs are under way and will continue well into 2009.

The U.S. Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) has designated Dec. 8-14 as National Influenza Vaccination Week to highlight the importance of giving vaccinations through the winter months. While influenza outbreaks can occur as early as October, most activity peaks in January or later.

Last year's flu season was the worst in four years, partly because of a mismatch between a vaccine and certain flu strains.

Each vaccine contains three influenza viruses. The viruses are changed each year based on international surveillance and estimates about which types and strains will circulate. All three strains were changed for this season's vaccines. Changing one or two strains is relatively common; replacing all three is unusual, Food and Drug Administration (FDA) officials said. It takes about six months for vaccine manufacturers to grow the viruses in chicken eggs and formulate them into trivalent (three-strain) vaccines.

"One of the biggest challenges in the fight against influenza is producing new vaccines every year," said Jesse Goodman, M.D., director, FDA Center for Biologics Evaluation and Research. "There is no other instance where new vaccines must be made every year."

Recommendations

According to the CDC, 5 to 20 percent of the U.S. population get the flu each year. More than 200,000

Why didn't I get my flu vaccine?



Influenza (the "flu") can be a very serious disease. Even healthy adults can get sick and miss work. If you get the flu, you can spread it to family, friends or co-workers.

DON'T GET THE FLU. DON'T SPREAD THE FLU.

Get Vaccinated.

CDC Advertisement

people are hospitalized from flu complications, and about 36,000 Americans die annually from the disease.

While a variety of preventive measures are recommended, health officials say the single best way to protect against the flu is to get vaccinated. Even when vaccines and circulating strains aren't an exact match, they still provide some protection and may reduce the severity of the illness or prevent flu-related complications.

When promoting vaccines to employees, experts say it is advisable for employers and their medical provider partners to explain the difference between a flu shot and the nasal-spray flu vaccine. The flu shot is an inactivated vaccine that is given with a needle; the nasal spray is a live attenuated influenza vaccine (LAIV) made with weakened viruses that do not cause the flu.

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Flu Shot Form an Educational Tool

Health care workers who decline the flu vaccine are often asked to sign an immunization declination form. Experience shows use of a declination form featuring a statement on the value of the vaccine and boxes employees can check to explain why they are declining helps increase compliance rates, according to a study by the Emory University Healthcare Influenza Steering Committee, Atlanta, Ga. For example, employees who indicate they are afraid the shot will make them sick can be targeted for education on how the flu cannot be acquired from inactivated vaccine. A declination form in combination with a comprehensive vaccination campaign on all shifts is even more effective.

Employers Uncertain About Wellness Role

Employers are uncertain about the extent of their responsibility with regard to encouraging healthier behavior among employees, according to a poll commissioned by Blue Cross and Blue Shield of North Carolina (BCBSNC). Among North Carolina employers surveyed, 68 percent said they strongly believe health is linked to productivity; 62 percent strongly agreed there is a connection between worker health and health care costs. However, less than a third feel strongly that they do, or should, influence worker health. This disconnect may help explain why employers have been slow to adopt programs and policies to promote physical activity, nutrition and other preventive health programs at their workplaces, company officials said.

Resource Directory

An Unhealthy America: The Economic Burden of Chronic Disease; study estimates avoidable costs if a serious effort were made to improve Americans' health; Milken Institute; www.milkeninstitute.org.

How to Add Sparkle and Pizzazz to Your Health Promotion Program; K Cash; Health Resources Online; www.healthresourcesonline.com/wellness.

Preventing Back Injuries in Healthcare Settings; J Bell, et al.; National Institute for Occupational Safety and Health Science Blog; www.cdc.gov/niosh/blog

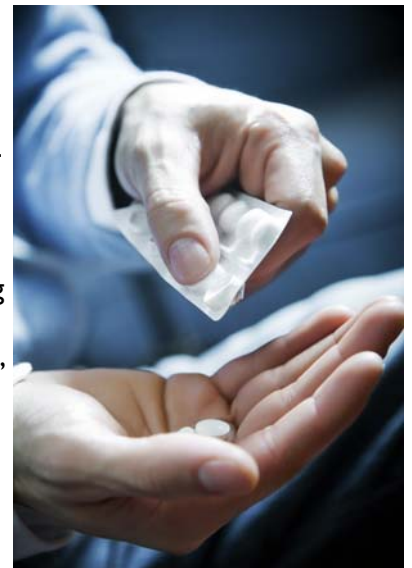
Workplace Investigations; investigative practices and principles; Lorman Education Services; www.hrresource.com.

"The majority of us spend most of our waking hours on the job, and the habits and attitudes we develop at work have a real impact on our health and the cost of our medical care," said BCBSNC President and CEO Bob Greczyn. "Comprehensive workplace wellness programs can return \$3, or more, for every \$1 invested, but we've got a lot of work to do to persuade employers that worker health is their concern and that programs are worth the time, effort and money."

Pain Killer Abuse a Growing Problem

Death rates for unintentional poisoning have more than tripled over the past 20 years and now exceed drunk driving as the leading, singular cause of motor vehicle crashes, according to new data from the National Safety Council. The greatest increase was seen among men and women of working age (20-64). Abuse of prescription painkillers, primarily opioid analgesics such as oxycodone, methadone and hydrocodone, was cited as the leading cause of the increase in vehicular accidents.

Among adults who used painkillers for non-medical purposes: 60 percent obtained them from a friend or relative for free, 20 percent obtained them from a doctor, 9 percent bought them from a friend or relative, and 11 percent obtained them from another source, the National Safety Council reported.



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Testing has shown that both the flu shot and the nasal-spray vaccine are effective: About two weeks after vaccination, antibodies that provide protection against influenza virus infection develop in the body. The flu shot is approved for use in children older than 6 months, healthy adults and adults with chronic medical conditions. LAIV nasal spray is approved for use in healthy people 2-49 years of age who are not pregnant.

The CDC's Advisory Committee on Immunization Practices (ACIP) recommends that certain people get vaccinated each year. (Visit the CDC's flu website for a list of target populations). People who should not be vaccinated without first consulting a physician include those who have a severe allergy to chicken eggs or had a severe reaction to an influenza vaccination; developed Guillain-Barre syndrome within six weeks of getting an influenza vaccine; or recently had a moderate-to-severe illness with a fever (if so, they should wait until they recover to get vaccinated).

Preventive Measures

To help prevent the spread of germs, the following steps are recommended:

- Cover your mouth and nose when you sneeze or cough.
- Wash your hands often with soap and warm water for 15 to 20 seconds. The soap and scrubbing action help dislodge and remove germs. When soap and water are not available, alcohol-based disposable hand wipes or gel sanitizers may be used.
- Avoid touching your eyes, nose or mouth.
- Stay home when you are sick and check with a health care provider when needed.
- Practice other good health hygiene habits.

According to ACIP, antiviral drugs used to treat the flu are adjuncts to - not substitutes for - annual vaccination.



Researchers Say Flu Strains Originate in Asia

Researchers say flu viruses originate in east Asia and Southeast Asia, and it takes about eight to nine months before these new viruses reach western Europe and North America.

A 2002-2007 analysis of viruses from six continents shows continuous circulation in Asia via a regional network of temporarily overlapping epidemics; annual epidemics in temperate regions were "seeded" from this network.

Dan Jernigan, M.D., deputy director of the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention's Influenza Division, said the CDC was involved in promoting tighter surveillance of emerging flu viruses in east and Southeast Asia last spring. The objective of surveillance is to develop more effective and better-matched vaccines.

Reference: The Global Circulation of Seasonal Influenza A (H3N2) Viruses; C Russell, et al.; *Science*, Vol. 320, No. 5874, April 18, 2008.

References & Resources

1. Evaluation of Influenza Prevention in the Workplace Using Personally Controlled Health Records: Randomized Control Trial; F Bourgeois, et al.; *J Med Internet Res* 2008;10(1):e5; www.jmir.org.
2. Flu Vaccine and Egg Allergy: American College of Allergy, Asthma, and Immunology: www.acaai.org/public/advice/Fluvaccine_eggallergy
3. Guidance on Preparing Workplaces for an Influenza Pandemic: www.osha.gov/publications/OSHA3327pandemic.pdf
4. Repeated Commit-or-Defer Decisions with a Deadline: The Influenza Vaccine Composition; researchers present a mathematical model that could be used during the vaccine selection process to analyze illness severity, production rates and vaccine effectiveness; L Kornish, R Keeney; *Operations Research*, 2008; 56 (3): 527.
5. U.S. Centers for Disease Control and Prevention flu website: www.cdc/flu
6. World Health Organization Global Influenza Surveillance Network: www.who.int/csr/disease/influenza/surveillance

ADA Amendments Act Signed

President Bush has signed the Americans with Disabilities Act Amendments Act of 2008, which overturns several landmark Supreme Court decisions that narrowed the definition of “disability.” Employment law attorneys say the changes will make it more challenging for employers to resolve ADA cases prior to trial. The amendments go into effect Jan. 1, 2009. Key provisions:

- Prohibit consideration of mitigating measures such as medication, prosthetics or assistive technology in determining whether an individual has a disability.
- Cover people who experience discrimination based on a perception of impairment regardless of whether the individual experiences disability.
- Require employers to provide reasonable accommodations only when individuals can demonstrate they have an impairment that substantially limits a major life activity, or has a record of such impairment. Accommodations need not be provided to an individual who is only “regarded as” having an impairment.

Personal Protective Equipment Warning

When an Occupational Health and Safety Administration (OSHA) standard requires an employer to provide personal protective equipment or training to its employees, the employer must do so for each employee subject to the requirement; any covered employee not trained/protected may be considered a violation for penalty purposes, according to proposed rules under review.



Record-keeping Rules Clarified

OSHA has posted a letter of interpretation in which it responds to questions about injury record-keeping rules involving days away from work, restricted duty and work-relatedness on its website. In one scenario, the agency addresses whether days that an injured employee is performing clerical services for her employer from her home (as a condition of her medical restriction) must be treated as restricted work activity or days away from work. Assuming the employee does

DOT Postpones Drug Testing Provision to Allow Time for Public Comment

Since the previous edition of *Partners* featuring changes to U.S. Department of Transportation (DOT) drug screening regulations was published, the DOT announced it has postponed enforcement of a new rule that makes direct observation mandatory in all follow-up and return-to-duty urine drug screen collections.

Direct observation is currently allowed, but not required, in these circumstances. In response to complaints that a notice of proposed rulemaking did not specifically seek public comments on this provision, the DOT decided to allow a 30-day comment period. Consequently, the effective date of mandatory direct observation for follow-up and return-to-duty testing has been postponed to November 1, 2008, pending the receipt of public comments and a written response to them from the DOT.

A second provision that requires collectors in direct-observation situations to check for devices used to cheat on tests by asking donors to raise and lower their clothing went into effect, as planned, on August 25.

not normally work from home, OSHA says the case should be recorded as days away from work. Visit www.osha.gov.

Train Wreck Triggers Cell Phone Ban

The California Public Utilities Commission issued a temporary order banning cell phone use by train operators after investigators confirmed the engineer of a commuter train was text-messaging while on duty the day the train ran a red light and collided head-on with a freight train, killing 25 and injuring more than 135.

Wellness Week Proposed

Reps. Stephanie Herseth Sandlin, D-SD, and Charles Boustany, R-LA, introduced legislation to designate the first week of April as National Workplace Wellness Week. The intent is to encourage employers to support employee health promotion and wellness activities. The measure is supported by the U.S. Chamber of Commerce and health care advocacy groups.