Eight Ways to Avoid Catching and Spreading the Flu

WHAT'S AT STAKE

Every year, millions of workers are infected with a contagious respiratory illness: influenza, commonly known as the flu. Many workers who are sick with the flu refuse to let the illness prevent them from working, thinking they can "tough it out." So they go to work with a reduced ability to work safely and productively, and they jeopardize the health of their co-workers.

WHAT'S THE DANGER

The flu virus is easily spread, mainly through droplets made when someone who has the flu coughs or sneezes into the air. When another person breathes in these droplets, or touches a contaminated surface and then touches her eyes, nose or mouth, that person can become infected. Unfortunately, while many people recover from the flu within a week or so, some people can develop serious complications, which may lead to death.

EXAMPLE
Good old Joe hasn't taken a sick day in 20 years. Nothing slows him down—not even a good dose of the flu. Sweating, sneezing, coughing and spluttering, he never misses a beat. But Joe doesn't deserve an award for his unfailing devotion to his job. Less than a week after Joe's illness, four of his co-workers have called in sick, including Bob, whose diabetes puts him at risk of developing a serious complication.

HOW TO PROTECT YOURSELF

A healthy workplace is in everyone's best interests. Here's how you can help:

1. Get your flu shot annually and early. A seasonal flu vaccine will protect you against the three seasonal viruses that health experts believe are most likely to occur that year.

2. Cover your mouth when you cough or sneeze. An uncovered cough or a sneeze can spread airborne droplets of cold or flu germs over several feet. Try to have a tissue handy to sneeze or cough into. If you don’t have one, cough or sneeze into your elbow, not your hands.

3. Keep your hands away from your eyes, nose and mouth. Your eyes, nose and mouth are superhighways for germs. Most people aren’t even aware they are touching their own faces, so make a conscious “hands off” effort and you’ll cut your risk for picking up the flu.

4. Wash your hands—frequently—with plenty of soap and warm water. Wash your hands for at least 15 seconds, paying attention to your fingertips, between your fingers, the bases of your thumbs, the backs of your hands and wrists, and your lower arms. Use a paper towel to turn off the tap and open the bathroom door.

5. Keep common surfaces sanitized. Germs love to live on door knobs, telephones, computer keyboards, microwave ovens, kitchen counters, fridge handles and anywhere else touched by human hands. Use a germ-killing cleaning product to wipe down surfaces that are frequently touched by you and your co-workers, especially any shared equipment.

6. Distance yourself socially during flu season. Unfortunately, winter flu season coincides with the festive season, when people socialize, shake hands, hug and offer pecks on the cheeks. But if your workplace has been hit by flu, it’s best to abandon these social traditions and try to keep physical distance from your co-workers.

7. Be kind to your immune system: A strong immune system can help you fight off the flu or a cold or reduce its severity or duration. Eat properly, ensure you are getting enough vitamins and minerals (either through diet or supplements), exercise several

days of the week and try to get sufficient sleep.

8. Stay home if you’re sick. You aren’t doing anyone any favors sharing your germs. If you simply must work, ask if you can work from home while keeping your germs to yourself.

FINAL WORD

Perhaps one day medical science will come up with a cure for all strains of the flu. In the meantime, do what you can to decrease your chances of catching and spreading it.