

Banning germs from the workplace

With H1N1 on the rise, keeping an office spic-and-span has never been more important

By Caitlin Crawshaw, Freelance; Edmonton Journal November 13, 2009



Because the H1N1 virus travels about one to two metres every time an infected person sneezes or coughs, it's ideal to place workstations at least two metres apart.

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With swine flu on the rise and winter on its way, workplaces all over the country are crossing their fingers that employees get the vaccine and updating their corporate plans in anticipation of greater employee absenteeism.

But while phone trees and emergency protocols are important, there's a lot that can be done on a daily basis to ward off bugs at work and maintain business as usual throughout the coming months.

Jan Chappell, a senior technical specialist with the Canadian Centre for Occupational Health and Safety, explains that regular employee hand-washing is crucial.

"People get wound up but really, it's just the normal, everyday stuff that you have to do," she says.

While Chappell isn't aware of any data suggesting a certain frequency of hand washing, doing it with some regularity--and always after sneezing, eating or using the toilet -- should suffice. Regular soap and warm water, or gel sanitizers, will get the job done. Like many workplaces, her office has placed a number of dispensers on the walls for easy access.

Because the H1N1 virus travels about one to two metres every time an infected person sneezes or coughs, it's ideal to place workstations at least two metres apart. Ensuring the air in the office is properly ventilated is also important, says Chappell.

Microorganisms often congregate on phones and other shared surfaces and Chappell suggests periodically wiping down these areas, especially if you share a workstation.

While she doesn't condemn handshakes at work, use discretion. "You can still greet people and be very nice about it, but I think if you're a little bit sick, even with a cold, you should say, 'Sorry, I have a cold,' " says Chappell.

Just as absenteeism can cause serious productivity losses, so can presenteeism. Sick employees really do need to stay home--especially those who are just starting to have symptoms. People are most contagious about eight hours before they come down with the flu, when they're just beginning to feel under the weather, she says. "There's toughing it out and then there's sharing the joy."

As far as office cleaning protocols go, there shouldn't be a need to do anything beyond the usual janitorial methods, says Chappell. "It's really behaving like a regular flu virus-- it's just new, so more people will get sick. But it's not an abnormal virus in the way it behaves."

However, Peter Sheldon, vice-president (operations) of Coverall Health-Based Cleaning Systems, believes that not all cleaning methods are equal. He says his company specializes in busting germs in commercial spaces. In his view, certain cleaning strategies can greatly reduce the spread of H1N1 at work.

"In today's world, things have changed. Twenty years ago, we didn't think about organisms coming into the workplace that could potentially kill us," says Sheldon. He says he's not interested in fear mongering but hopes to "educate people to take a defensive posture about potential threats."

Sheldon recommends companies talk to their janitorial service to ensure they're taking certain precautions, including: using hospital-grade antibacterial/disinfectant cleaning products, microfibre cleaning cloths, and flat mops rather than conventional string mops.

Certain cleaning techniques are also more effective in reducing cross-contamination, says Sheldon. Singledip flat mopping keeps clean water from being contaminated--simply moving around the dirt and germs from room to room.

Because restrooms can be "ground zero for disease transmission," Sheldon suggests no-touch spray and vacuum cleaning, which involves the use of a low-pressure stream of water, chemical injector, wet vac and high-pressure rinse.

Health-based cleaning is generally more efficient, says Sheldon, and shouldn't cost more than traditional cleaning strategies. "You can't ever eliminate the unseen world. It's always been here and always will be, but you can put yourself in a position to minimize the risks."

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