

risk alert



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Swine flu: facts and prevention tips

Health officials are concerned about the potential for the rapid spread of the H1N1 virus, commonly referred to as swine flu. The number of cases reported has grown exponentially since the outbreak was first detected April 15, 2009.

The Centers for Disease Control and Prevention anticipates that there will continue to be more cases involving hospitalization and more deaths associated with this virus. The estimates project up to 40 percent of Americans could get swine flu this year. This is nearly twice the number of those who catch the flu in a normal season.



Houses of worship need to be ready for a significant outbreak. Religious leaders need to be prepared if widespread outbreaks force many to stay home or a localized outbreak causes health officials to shut down a house of worship for any length of time.

A church in Tennessee cut short a church activity for middle school age children after many became sick with flu-like symptoms. When more children, staff and volunteers became ill the following day, the church canceled service for the entire week. Canceled services might be a familiar occurrence across the country once the normal flu season arrives.

The strain that is causing this outbreak is contagious and spread person to person through coughing, sneezing or touching contaminated surfaces. Symptoms can last up to seven days and may not occur until three days after initial exposure. The symptoms for the virus include fever, headache, coughing, sneezing, sore throat, fatigue, nausea, vomiting or diarrhea. The virus has shown to be especially harmful to children under the age of 5 and those with chronic health problems.

Plan for the possibility of a significant outbreak

Many businesses and schools are planning for the possibility of responding to a public health emergency. A house of worship should be no different. Immediately review your plans to protect the health of your staff, members and guests. These plans should include:

- Promoting everyday preventative actions, such as hand hygiene and sneezing etiquette.
- Providing easy access to control supplies, such as soap, hand sanitizers, personal protective equipment (gloves or surgical masks), tissues and general cleaning supplies.
- Developing an alternate communication method with the congregation in the event of an outbreak at your facility. Announcement methods may include e-mail, Web postings or telephone trees.

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- Keeping informed on local/state plans in the event that civil authority prohibits public gatherings or limits building access during a severe disease outbreak.
- Tracking and reporting influenza-like illness among those who enter the building.
- Planning for the possibility of weeklong employee or volunteer absenteeism. This would include the possibility of temporarily being without key employees, such as pastors and administrators, who were exposed to the virus.
- Preparing for alternative worship practices. This would include nonhandshake greetings, using a single drop location instead of passing offering baskets or attendance pads and individually packaged communion distribution.
- Ensuring that proper food safety practices are followed for food events. See the Food Safety *risk alert* (www.churchmutual.com/documents/RAFoodSafety.pdf) for more information.

Spring to put the plan into action

In a case where H1N1 influenza is reported at your facility, notify your local health department immediately. They will share the most current regulations and provide guidelines to follow, depending on the severity of the outbreak at your facility and in your area. This guidance may include the recommendation of closing your facility or cleaning large areas of your facility.

Tracing where this person might have been and how they might have contracted the virus will be beneficial to limit future exposures and for cleaning purposes. Keep surfaces, such as tables and bathroom counters, toys and shared items clean by wiping them down with a disinfectant.

Separate those who are known to be sick

If a sick person is not able to leave immediately, allow them to use a room separate from the common areas. Persons with the flu may be contagious up to seven days after they get sick. Ask those with flu-like symptoms to stay away until they have been symptom free for 24 hours.

Stay informed on the latest information

Continue to follow the plan that you have in place, including keeping informed on the H1N1 situation. The following sites can be used for prevention, treatment and guidance.

- Centers for Disease Control and Prevention regularly updates their information: www.cdc.gov or 800-CDC-INFO.
- Department of Health and Human Services: www.pandemicflu.gov/.
- Guidance on Preparing Workplaces for an Influenza Pandemic: <http://osha.gov/Publications/OSHA3327pandemic.pdf>.
- More information on cleaning and United States Environmental Protection Agency registered products effective against the flu: www.epa.gov.

For a complete collection of the *risk alert* series, visit our Web site and look in the Safety Resources section.