

# Influenza and the workplace

## stopping the flu starts with you

Influenza ('the flu') is a serious illness, caused by a virus. Flu symptoms – e.g. bouts of shivering, sweating, high fever, muscle aches and pains, weakness, dry cough, and extreme tiredness - are debilitating, and some individuals are at risk of serious complications. People with influenza shed the virus and spread the infection even before they themselves begin to feel ill.

Each year, 10-20% of the population may become ill with influenza, resulting in increased sick leave and lost productivity at work<sup>1</sup>. In the workplace it is very difficult to protect staff once an influenza outbreak has begun.

<b>Each healthy adult who gets the flu is likely to have:</b>	<b>5-6 days restricted activity<sup>1</sup></b>
	<b>3 days absence from work<sup>1</sup></b>
	<b>Additional visits to the doctor<sup>1</sup></b>
	<b>0.4 days absence looking after other people with the flu<sup>2</sup></b>

### EFFECTS OF INFLUENZA IN THE WORKPLACE

#### Reduced morale and productivity

- Influenza can spread easily in a workplace environment.
- Sick leave absence caused by influenza creates extra pressure and workload for the unaffected workers.
- Those with the flu who 'soldier on', or come back too soon, may work below par while affected.

#### Compromised workplace safety and efficiency

- Flu can slow reaction times by 20-40%<sup>3</sup>. This can lead to increased risk of injuries and mistakes by flu-affected staff.



# benefits of influenza vaccination programs in the workplace

## Employees

- Helps maintain health and wellbeing of staff
- Avoidance of sick leave
- Reduced sick leave causes less pressure and workload for fellow workers
- Staff morale is boosted because the employer is investing in their health and welfare
- Reduced risk of taking the flu home to other family members (esp young and old)

## Employers

- Reduced sick leave absence
- Potential cost-saving to the organisation
- Helps maintain staff performance and productivity
- Less risk of workplace injuries and mistakes
- Less risk of spreading influenza amongst co-workers, and hence family contacts and community
- Reinforces to the staff that they are valued by their organisation

## Why unions should consider supporting influenza vaccination programs in the workplace

- Where the workplace flu vaccination programs have been introduced, research has demonstrated that the health and welfare of employees, is superior to employees with no program
- Improved workplace safety and productivity
- Less staff sick leave absence and less risk of unrealistic workloads for uninfected staff
- Improved workplace relations between the union and its members and the employer

## four key facts about flu shots

### **Inactivated influenza vaccine can never cause influenza.**

There is no live virus in the flu vaccine, so it cannot cause influenza. It is, on the other hand, possible to be already infected but not yet experiencing any flu symptoms when you are vaccinated, or to become infected immediately afterwards – before the vaccine has taken effect.

### **Being vaccinated gives you the best chance of not catching the flu – and not passing it on.**

In all of our daily lives, it is very difficult to avoid all risk of exposure to an infection as common as influenza that is spread by airborne droplets. While no vaccination is 100% effective, having a flu shot is the best protection available for you and the

people you work with. Typically, flu vaccines prevent influenza in 70–90% of those vaccinated.

### **Influenza vaccine may also provide some protection against related strains of the flu.**

New strains of influenza are constantly appearing. Because each new one is a mutation of an earlier one, influenza vaccines often provide some level of protection against the new strains. On the other hand, of course, there are many 'flu-like' viruses for which influenza vaccine does not provide immunity.

### **The sooner you are vaccinated the better.**

The vaccine takes about two weeks to start working, so it is best to be vaccinated before the 'flu season' is at its height. Optimum immunity levels last 9–12 months, so it is possible to be vaccinated as early as February and remain protected for the rest of the year.



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## everyone deserves protection

### References

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2. Ahmed F et al., Influenza vaccination for healthy young adults, *N Engl J Med* 2001, 345 (21); 1543-1547.
3. Smith AP et al., Effect of influenza B virus infection on human performance. *BMJ* 1993, 306; 760-61

[www.flu.com.au](http://www.flu.com.au)

