

## Protecting patients and others from influenza in the health care setting

### **Issue:**

Health care workers who usually skip a flu shot need to take a harder look at who they may be harming the most — their patients and co-workers. According to the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC), the number of cases of influenza-associated illness that occurred last season was the highest since the 2009 H1N1 pandemic, when an estimated 60 million people were sick with influenza. During the 2017-2018 flu season, an estimated 48.8 million became ill with influenza, 22.7 million went to a health care provider, 959,000 were hospitalized, and 79,400 died from influenza.

Not every flu season is the same. Flu seasons range in severity from low to very high. Severity is assessed by the CDC based on key flu indicators, such as visits to the hospital or clinics, or deaths related to the flu.

Clean your hands frequently with soap and water or alcohol-based hand rub to help protect yourself from germs.

Avoid touching your eyes, nose and mouth, as these are openings for germs to enter your body after your hands have touched a contaminated surface.

Practice good health habits, especially during flu season, like frequently cleaning and disinfecting surfaces that you touch.

**If you feel ill with flu symptoms, help protect others:**

- Stay home from work or school if you are sick. You can spread the flu virus up to one day after symptoms subside; for this reason it's important to stay home for at least 24 hours after your fever is gone without the use of fever-reducing medication.
- When you cough and sneeze, cover your mouth and nose with tissue — or your elbow when a tissue is not available. Always remember to clean your hands with alcohol-based hand rub or soap and water after handling tissue.

**Safety actions to consider:**

Joint Commission-accredited organizations are required to offer a flu vaccination to licensed independent practitioners and staff (see Infection Prevention and Control standard IC.02.04.01). Health care organizations can help health care workers understand their responsibility to protect themselves and their patients from influenza, as well as support and encourage staff to take precautions to prevent the spread of viruses, including influenza viruses. In addition, the following actions can be taken by health care organizations:

Put in place supportive, non-punitive time-off policies to encourage sick employees to not come into work.

Make flu vaccine available. 4.7 (h)(1)-(2) 9.3 (l)-1 (r)-73.6 (o)-13.3 (s)-04(p)-8.3 (loy)-20.6 (e)(1) (r)-73.6 (s)-0.7 (t)-7.6 (wa)-8.6



Legal disclaimer: This material is meant as an information piece only; it is not a standard or a *Sentinel Event Alert*. The intent of *Quick Safety* is to raise awareness and to be helpful to Joint Commission-accredited organizations. The information in this publication is derived from actual events that occur in health care.