



Fighting the Flu

Organizations Should Take Notice and Take Action



How to Avert a Public Health and Economic Crisis

Global health experts are sounding the alarms about the influenza virus this season. While most people who contract the flu will recover, their symptoms will force them to stay home for anywhere from five days to two weeks. Severe cases can result in pneumonia, hospitalization, and even death. Not only does flu represent a major public health issue, it also has multi-billion-dollar ramifications for US business each year. What can organizations do to prepare for this annual health emergency? Plan ahead and commit to ensuring that everyone has access to a safe, compliant, flu vaccine. This means starting now to plan for next year's flu season.

The Situation Today

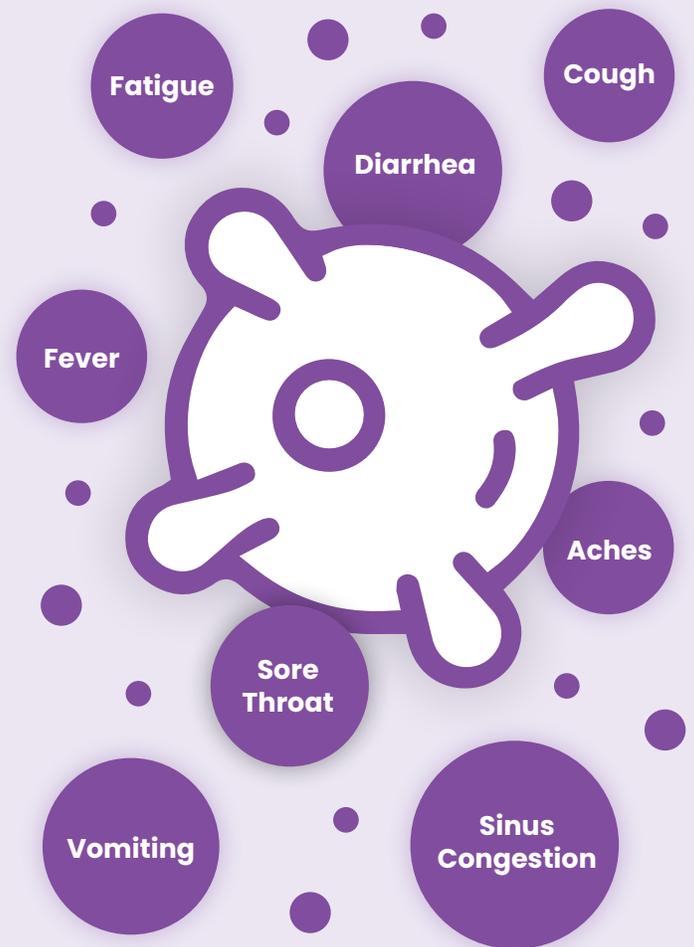
Although the COVID pandemic captured more headlines, when society reopened and in-person gatherings resumed, flu came back with a vengeance. The severity of flu season in Australia provides an early warning system for the US, as winter in the southern hemisphere occurs from June-August. Australia's 2022 flu season saw a tenfold rise in cases compared to the previous season.¹ According to the World Health Organization, the 2022-23 flu arrived in North America with a drastic and rapid increase in cases.² Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) also reported early increases in seasonal flu activity.³

By mid-January, 2023, CDC reported at least 24,000,000 flu-related illnesses, 260,000 hospitalizations, and 16,000 deaths.⁴

Further complicating the problem, vaccination acceptance rates are lagging. Some experts attribute this to vaccine fatigue, a reaction to information overload stemming from the COVID pandemic. Others blame the widespread misinformation about the safety of vaccines. Regardless of the root causes, influenza cases are surging, stressing health systems, and creating a ripple effect with economic implications for businesses.

What is Influenza?

According to the National Institutes of Health (NIH), "Influenza is a communicable viral disease that affects the upper respiratory tract including upper and lower respiratory passages."⁵ Symptoms may include fever, aches, cough, fatigue, sore throat, sinus congestion, vomiting, and diarrhea, and may last for up to two weeks.



The illness is highly contagious and those who contract it are often quite debilitated. Recovery requires several days of rest and isolation, which impacts individuals, families/caregivers, and workplaces.

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The Devastating Impact of Influenza

Every year, influenza invades the US from October through May, hitting its peak from December through March. Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) reports the following numbers:^{*6}

36 Million
flu-related illnesses

16 Million
flu-related medical visits

390,000
flu-related hospitalizations

25,000
flu-related deaths

**These figures reflect the 2019–2020 flu season which was typical; 2021 statistics were skewed due to the COVID pandemic. Preliminary counts for the 2022–23 flu season are very high and on track to match and/or exceed the numbers listed above.*



The Real Cost of Influenza

The NIH estimates that the flu generates direct and indirect costs of \$11.2 billion.

Direct costs of the flu include inpatient and outpatient expenses, the costs of self-management, the costs of potential complications, hospitalizations, and in the worst case, mortality. There are also significant indirect costs, which, though more difficult to quantify, are real and onerous. Indirect costs refer to decreased productivity and missed wages for patients and caregivers, along with absenteeism and presenteeism, which is the term for being at work but not performing effectively. Additional indirect costs include lost sales and revenue, as well as the potential loss of customers/clients who may turn to other providers or vendors if their needs cannot be met due to delays, short staffing, inefficiency, and service disruptions caused by illness.

In terms of the actual costs that flu wreaks on individual businesses, the Society for Human Resource Management (SHRM) reports some sobering numbers:

“The estimated amount of time lost for a worker being out with flu is five days with an average cost of \$200 lost per workday. Over a period of five days, the flu can cost \$1,000 for each worker, even before healthcare costs are calculated.”⁸

Given the costs to businesses when employees contract the flu, vaccines are a crucial investment.

Access: Overcoming the Challenge

Despite the recommendation by CDC for all individuals over the age of six months to receive the flu vaccine, the acceptance rate is about 50%. Racial and ethnic disparities exist within these statistics; lower rates of coverage are reported among Hispanic and Black communities.⁹

According to the *Healthnext 2022 Benchmark Report*, 65% of organizations surveyed do not actively engage and maintain relationships with trusted community physician practices for onsite clinical programs. This indicates a missed opportunity to remove barriers to healthcare for employees and their families.¹⁰ Such lack of engagement will also reduce access to vaccinations.

CDC recommends that employers take action to keep workplaces healthy with onsite flu vaccines.¹¹ Compliance with this CDC guidance removes barriers to access and stops the spread of flu, therefore many proactive organizations are stepping in to fill the gap as part of their Corporate Social Responsibility (CSR). Through CSR, businesses cultivate a culture of good citizenship with respect to the community, the environment, and the economy. Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion policy (DEI) comprises a key pillar of CSR. Prioritizing employee health is one way to uphold DEI and CSR, particularly given the disparity in vaccine access among diverse communities. To that end, more and more employers are embracing employee population health as a CSR and offering services such as vaccine clinics to protect their communities from flu and other illnesses.

To ensure that a vaccination program is accepted and fully utilized, providers must make it hassle free, easy to use, and highly accessible. This means that benefits managers and HR professionals should be able to make one phone call or click a link to book the clinic, and the participants must be offered maximum convenience to make appointments or simply walk in.

The upside for the organization is significant, and the cost, when weighed against the risk of widespread flu, is negligible.



Benefits of a Workplace Flu Vaccine Clinic

Hosting a workplace flu vaccine clinic offers many of benefits to an organization:

Enhancing health and protection of the workforce

Spending wisely and economically on prevention rather than incurring outsized expenses and losses related to illnesses/absenteeism when an outbreak occurs

Maintaining productivity and workflow

Demonstrating an authentic commitment to CSR and DEI

Decreasing absenteeism, whether due to illness or time off to secure a vaccine elsewhere

Delivering convenience for management and staff

Access is key to ensuring widespread vaccinations, and it is critical to partner with an experienced Clinical Services Team to deliver safe, compliant, professionally-staffed clinics. To ensure full access and inclusion, vouchers for remote workers can be issued for use at local providers.

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How to Identify the Right Clinical Partner

Get the FACTS: Best-in-class vaccination clinic solutions are:



Flexible: Clinics must accommodate the diverse and varied needs of individuals and organizations. Proven providers must demonstrate agility and scalability to address changing capacity and vaccination requirements, including the ability to deploy onsite facilities quickly. The top providers can administer vaccinations up to 12 hours a day, 7 days a week.



Accessible: Vaccination clinics must meet participants where they are, with sufficient appointments, and mobile, walk-up, and drive-through modalities if needed. In addition, providers must ensure that no participant pays out-of-pocket charges; all accounting is handled seamlessly with the organization.



Compliant: Providers must be adherent to all OSHA guidelines and HIPPA requirements and observe all site logistic and infrastructure requirements including information technology, cold storage, data logging, transportation, and reporting.



Turnkey: Clinicians must deliver all infrastructure needs including Wi-Fi, electricity, HVAC/heating, canopy, refrigeration, storage, signage, distancing tape, traffic management, waste pick-up, and biohazard waste removal.



Safe: Clinics must include all PPE required for administration of the vaccines and the equipment and staff to store and maintain vaccines according to local, state, and federal requirements, including no-waste policies. Further, the clinics must provide qualified post-administration vaccination and medical services in case patients have an adverse reaction to the vaccine.

Start Planning Now!

It's never too early to start your flu preparedness campaign. Demand for vaccine doses is expected to soar in response to the severity of the last season. In addition, because COVID-19 variants and the flu virus are both present and requiring vaccinations, many individuals will take their flu vaccinations in late August and September in order to spread out the two shots over time. This creates an early deadline for reserving flu vaccine doses to ensure availability and pricing. Prudent leaders are booking their clinics now to protect their teams during the 2023/2024 flu season.

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Conclusion

At first glance, flu appears to be a public health issue, but its economic consequences have forced business leaders to take notice and take action. Proactive organizations are galvanizing to combat this urgent public health and economic problem by complying with CDC guidance:

All individuals over the age of six months should have an annual flu vaccine.

Employers should provide free flu vaccination clinics to optimize population health.

Failure to protect employees from flu can risk dire economic consequences. Absenteeism from flu can cost businesses losses of \$200 per employee per day—and most flu cases require a five-day recovery period. This translates into minimal estimated losses of \$1000 per flu case, not counting healthcare costs. Providing a robust flu vaccination program in the workplace is the best way to protect employee populations from contracting flu and avoiding these economic disasters. In the costs-benefits analysis, a workplace flu vaccination clinic is one of the best investments a business can make to ensure a healthy, productive workforce throughout the year, and now is the time to plan for next year's flu season.



About Wellness Coaches

Since 2002, Wellness Coaches has been a leading provider of clinical, wellbeing, and safety solutions. Our offerings deliver high-quality healthcare, increased engagement, and produce measurable reductions in health and safety risks and costs for our clients. We offer customizable solutions across the full continuum of care, from prevention and wellbeing to robust clinical services. Our offerings include pre-chronic and chronic disease management, primary care, a full range of immunizations, biometric testing and other diagnostic services, healthcare staffing, and pandemic response. With a national network of more than 25,000 healthcare staff, Wellness Coaches can rapidly deploy its services at scale for private, municipal, state, and federal government customers in all 50 states.

Citations

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- ⁸ Getsinger, Carrie. "Onsite Flu Shots Save Health and Absence Costs." *SHRM*, SHRM, 16 Aug. 2019, <https://www.shrm.org/resourcesandtools/hr-topics/benefits/pages/onsite-flu-shots.aspx>.
- ⁹ "Flu Vaccination Coverage, United States, 2020-21 Influenza Season." *Centers for Disease Control and Prevention*, Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, 7 Oct. 2021, <https://www.cdc.gov/flu/fluview/coverage-2021estimates.htm>.
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- ¹¹ "Promoting Vaccination in the Workplace." *Centers for Disease Control and Prevention*, Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, 25 Oct. 2021, <https://www.cdc.gov/flu/business/promoting-vaccines-workplace.htm>.