YOUR YEARLY REMINDER

As the weather begins to change, flu season is upon us.

The days are growing shorter. The wind is picking up, bringing with it crisp fall air, turkey and holiday joy.

With this seasonal change comes my favorite time of year: flu season. The Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) states that December, January and February are peak months for influenza activity. Combine that with family parties and holiday get-togethers, and we have a recipe for widespread sickness. Hence, this yearly reminder to be prepared in the workplace and to stay home if you are experiencing symptoms.

Flu’s direct cost to businesses is $7 billion in sick days and lost productivity with an estimated 17 million workdays lost, the CDC estimates. A National Health Interview Survey found the flu contributes to 200 million days of lost productivity and 75 million days of missed work.

Research shows the virus responsible for the stomach flu can live on certain surfaces for weeks. Some ways to contract it include:

- Eating food or drinking liquids that are contaminated.
- Touching surfaces or objects and then putting your hand or fingers in your mouth.
- Direct contact with a person who is infected.

While many of these recommendations stem from household with children, these same things translate to the workplace as well. Employees often come in to work sick, allowing the flu and other illnesses to spread. New research released by Accountemps confirms this fact.

The global staffing firm surveyed working professionals, 90% of whom admitted they have come into the office with cold or flu symptoms. “Whether it's due to large workloads, pressure from the boss or because they can't afford to take time off, it's all too common for employees to come to the office feeling sick when they really should be resting,” says Michael Steinitz, Accountemps’ senior executive director. “Staying home when you've got a cold or the flu is the best way to avoid spreading germs to others and fight the illness faster.”

With that said, here are 10 tips from the CDC about how you can keep a healthy, productive workplace over the course of the winter months.

1. Get a seasonal flu vaccine.
2. Host a flu vaccine clinic at the workplace.
3. Review sick leave policies that encourage sick workers to stay at home without fear of reprisals.
4. Recommend workers stay home if they are sick until at least 24 hours after their fever is gone. Persons with the flu are most contagious during the first 3 days of their illness, according to the CDC.
5. Send home workers who exhibit symptoms upon reporting to work or become sick during the day.
6. Develop work-from-home policies if possible, including those workers who need to stay home for sick family members.
7. Provide tissues, no-touch trash cans, hand soap, sanitizer, wipes and disinfecting cleaner for employees’ workstations, door knobs, etc.
8. Remind employees to cover coughs and sneezes with tissues and provide easy access to trash cans.
9. Remind workers to wash their hands and provide easy access to water, soap and alcohol-based rubs.
10. Provide resources for employees who may be at higher-risk for flu complications such as pregnant women or adults with a chronic medical condition such as asthma, heart disease, or diabetes. Individuals at high risk for flu complications should seek medical attention right away if they do become sick with the flu, the CDC states.

Lastly, one of the best things a leader can do is live by example. Managers and safety professionals should adhere to the same recommendations they provide and work from home or take a sick day if they are under the weather. This is a no-brainer. So, don’t make yourself sick by not being prepared.