

Swine Flu Alert

Monday, 27 April 2009

On April 26, 2009, the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) declared the recent swine flu outbreak in the United States to be a Public Health Emergency. At that time, there were 20 lab-confirmed swine flu cases in five states: eight in New York, seven in California, two in Texas, two in Kansas, and one in Ohio. These numbers will undoubtedly climb significantly in the near future.

In Mexico, more than 1,300 people have been hospitalized with swine flu, and the World Health Organization has attributed at least 20 deaths there to the disease, but other reliable sources believe that more than 80 people have died in Mexico as a result of the virus.

The Department of Homeland Security has issued guidance to employees who may encounter infected people while performing their official duties. The following additional advice for Border Patrol employees is provided by the National Border Patrol Council:

The incubation period for swine flu is 24-48 hours, and infected people are contagious for about seven days following the onset of symptoms, which are similar to the symptoms of regular human seasonal influenza and include fever, lethargy, lack of appetite, coughing and sneezing. Some people with swine flu also have reported runny nose, sore throat, nausea, vomiting and diarrhea. The disease is spread mainly person-to-person through coughing or sneezing by infected people.

If you develop any of these symptoms, you should call in sick to avoid infecting your co workers, file a Form CA-2 Notice of Occupational Disease, and notify the District Office of the Department of Labor's Office of Workers' Compensation Programs. You can locate the contact information for the appropriate District Office by clicking [here](#). In order to support your OWCP claim, you should immediately start documenting all encounters with people arriving from Mexico. You should also get tested for swine flu by a health care professional. (Once you explain that you come in daily contact with potentially infected people in your line of work, the health care professional should readily agree to test you.)

Since swine flu is widespread in Mexico, precautions should be taken whenever you come in contact with people arriving from that country. The CDC recommends that when dealing with potentially infected individuals, you should maintain a distance of at least six feet and avoid being in confined spaces with them. When dealing with individuals who are coughing and/or sneezing, the CDC recommends that you isolate the person and have them wear a surgical mask. (You can place uncooperative detainees in handcuffs to ensure that they don't remove the mask.) Additionally, you should wear an N95 respirator when in close contact (less than 6 feet) or in a confined space with potentially infected people, and should also consider wearing goggles when you will be face-to-face with them. When touching potentially infected individuals, such as while patting them down for weapons following an arrest, you should wear disposable gloves. As their name implies, these gloves should be discarded after one use. Afterward, cleanse your hands using an alcohol based gel if you are in the field, or with warm soap and water if you are near a water supply. Management is responsible for maintaining an adequate supply of these personal protective equipment items. You should also avoid touching your eyes, nose or mouth when your hands are not clean. This includes indirect contact such as eating with your hands.

Although there is no negotiated agreement at this time concerning any aspect of the wearing of N95 respirators, the Union has made it clear to management that it expects such items to be issued without requiring employees to complete a medical questionnaire and/or be fit tested, as that would delay the distribution and use of this important item of personal protective equipment. If the supply of N95 respirators at your station is inadequate, you should seriously consider buying some of your own until they become available. They are sold at most stores that carry tools and/or hardware, and are only a few dollars apiece, which is a small price to pay to safeguard your health. If management refuses to issue N95 respirators or forbids you from using them, remind them that Acting Commissioner Jayson P. Ahern

recommended the use of such respirators in his muster message dated April 27, 2009. If you experience problems regarding any of these issues, contact your Local Union representative immediately. Read the Union's latest letter to the agency regarding the N95 respirator.