



**National
Foundation for
Infectious
Diseases**

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New National Survey Shows Employees Feel Pressured to Go to Work, Despite Being Sick with Flu

NFID Provides Educational Assistance to Employers as U.S. Influenza Season Peaks

Bethesda, MD, February 27, 2006 – A new national survey indicates that 35 percent of U.S. workers feel pressured to go to work when they are sick with the flu, even though this causes 47 percent to feel annoyed or angry when a co-worker does so. When asked why they feel pressured to go to work, respondents cited the following reasons most often:

- 60% are concerned about their work not getting done
- 48% feel guilty for missing work (56% of women, 42% of men)
- 25% said they do not get paid for sick days
- 24% said they get minimal or no sick time off

Other reasons for feeling pressured include fear their boss will be angry (20%) and concern about job loss (18%).

Employees who go to work sick not only risk infecting their co-workers, but also may be less productive.¹ In addition, the *Harvard Business Review* cites evidence that “presenteeism” – the problem of workers' being on the job, but, because of illness or other medical conditions, not fully functioning – can have a serious impact in the workplace.² In a typical year, it is estimated that influenza – commonly called the flu – in the workplace may result in as much as \$10 billion in lost productivity.³

“Controlling flu spread in the workplace is important from both a public health and business perspective,” said Susan J. Rehm, M.D., medical director for the National Foundation for Infectious Diseases (NFID), and a clinician in the Department of Infectious Disease at the

¹ Smith AP, et al. Effect of influenza B virus infection on human performance. *BMJ*. 1993;306:760-761.

² Hemp P. Presenteeism: At Work – But Out of It. *Harvard Business Review*. October 2004, p.1-9.

³ David Cutler, Harvard University health economist. “Flu vaccine shortage could cost U.S. \$20 billion,” *Associated Press*, October 21, 2004.

Cleveland Clinic Foundation. “Whether real or perceived, there are obviously a number of factors driving people to go to work when they are sick with the flu.”

“America’s public health leaders and corporations need to work together to provide guidance to our workforce, so they can better understand the public health and economic implications of being sick at work. The ability to recognize symptoms is critical to help employees determine whether to stay home if sick,” she added. “NFID’s newest educational materials, designed specifically for the workplace, help address these challenges.”

Help From NFID: Flu-Fighting Checklist for Employees

To help employers and employees understand how they can control flu spread in the workplace, NFID developed an educational bulletin offering tips on minimizing the spread of flu, which can be posted in the workplace or distributed to employees. The bulletin can be downloaded by employers at www.nfid.org and was made possible through an educational grant from Roche.

The new bulletin includes a Flu-Fighting Checklist, a free tool for employers that outlines steps people can take to control flu spread. For example, immunization is the first line of defense in preventing influenza, and some workplaces offer flu vaccination programs. Employees can also contact their doctor or local health department to see where vaccines are locally available. Another option is antiviral medication, which can help prevent flu onset following exposure. As a treatment, antivirals such as oseltamivir (Tamiflu) and zanamivir (Relenza) can also reduce severity of flu symptoms and duration of illness.

Employees can also combat germ spread by washing hands frequently, keeping work areas clean, and using tissues properly.

Key Survey Findings

Fifty-eight percent of respondents in the survey said they have had co-workers come to work sick or with the flu this winter, and 30 percent said they have contracted the flu virus from a co-worker. Moreover, additional findings from the survey of U.S. workers indicate that since last year, the challenge of controlling flu in the workplace may be greater than it was before:

- Only 64% of people feel their company encourages employees to stay home if they are sick compared to 75% in a December 2004 survey.
- Forty percent of people are annoyed and 46% sympathetic when a co-worker comes to work with the flu, as compared to the 34% of people in the 2004 survey who reported being annoyed and 55% sympathetic.
- Fifty-two percent said their organization does not have a plan in place to prevent the spread of flu in the workplace.
- Of workers polled, 55% were concerned about seasonal or regular flu.

Survey Background & Methodology

Data presented was culled from two surveys, described below:

- An Omnibus survey was conducted by CARAVAN® Opinion Research Corporation via telephone. CARAVAN surveyed a national sample of 978 adults (18 years of age and older, employed full-time) living in private households in the U.S. The survey was conducted **January 26 – 30, 2006**. An additional survey followed **February 9 – 13, 2006**.
- An Omnibus survey was conducted by CARAVAN® Opinion Research Corporation via telephone, **December 10-13, 2004**. CARAVAN surveyed a national sample of 1,039 adults (524 men and 515 women 18 years of age and older) living in private households in the U.S.

About NFID

Founded in 1973, National Foundation for Infectious Diseases is a non-profit organization dedicated to public and professional educational programs about the causes, treatment and prevention of infectious diseases.

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