

# FLU FIGHTERS

## Tips on how to keep your office healthy this winter

By Cindy Hadish

Telephones, indispensable at the office, at the same time are notorious for spreading disease when shared.

Add to the mix shared computers, drinking fountains, handrails and doorknobs, and the work environment can become an illness incubator during flu season.

Employers and employees can reduce the risk of getting sick with basic hygiene, said Meghan Harris, epidemiologist with the Iowa Department of Public Health.

The "three-foot rule" applies to active coughing or sneezing.

Three feet or more is considered a safe distance to stay away while coughing or sneezing to prevent spreading airborne illness, Harris said, and a tissue should always be used and immediately thrown away.

Staying at home can not only help the sick employee recover, but also prevent co-workers from getting ill, she said.

That doesn't necessarily mean staying home for the duration of a cold.

### On the Net

► For more information, visit [www.idph.state.ia.us/adper/flu.asp](http://www.idph.state.ia.us/adper/flu.asp)

Harris said if a person is actively coughing, has a fever, sore throat and body aches, that worker likely has the flu and should be advised to stay home.

Employees also should be encouraged to get an annual flu shot, she said, to prevent getting the flu, or getting a milder version if the person does get sick.

Those shared telephones, computers and common surfaces should be regularly cleaned, Harris said.

Commercial disinfectants or bleach solutions of one-fourth cup bleach mixed with 1 gallon of water work well.

Other business tips offered by the Iowa Department of Public Health's Center for Acute Disease Epidemiology:

- **Influenza is often spread** by coughs and sneezes. Make sure disposable tissues are



Jim Slosiarek photo/The Edge

available in work areas for runny noses and sneezing.

- **Restrooms should be checked regularly** to ensure soap and paper towels are available for employee use.

- **Encourage the use of alcohol-based hand sanitizer** at employee desks. Hand sanitizer is effective in killing germs on hands when they are not visibly soiled. Appropriate times to use hand sanitizer are after coughing, sneezing or contact with infected surfaces, such as a keyboard or phone.

- **People often catch**

**influenza** and other viruses by picking up the virus on their hands, and then touching the nose, eyes or mouth, so wash hands several times a day, using soap and warm water for 15 to 20 seconds.

- **Employees should be encouraged** to contact their doctors when they become ill during flu season. If they are ill with influenza, anti-viral drugs may reduce the severity and length of illness when taken early in the illness. Antivirals need to be started within 48 hours of becoming ill to be effective.



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