

Wuhan Coronavirus: Stay Alert, But Don't Panic

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On January 30, 2020, the World Health Organization declared the outbreak of the Wuhan coronavirus a global health emergency. And, as reflected in the news, Chicago is the site where the first person-to-person transmission of the virus has been confirmed in the United States.

Although the risks actually remain very low locally, employers (especially with internationally traveling employees) should continue to take a measured approach by monitoring information from the State Department and Centers for Disease Control, and by educating employees about realistic travel risks. Employers should also consult U.S. Equal Employment Opportunity Commission guidance from the 2009 H1N1 influenza outbreak, as a reminder that companies must be careful when requesting information from an employee who calls in sick, when body temperatures can be taken during pandemics, and when deciding whether to require employees to stay home. More recently, the U.S. Occupational Safety & Health Administration created a webpage, which has information targeted to employees, healthcare workers, lab workers, airline workers, border control, waste management workers, and business travelers who have been exposed.

As is (or was) the case with influenza, SARS, avian flu, and swine flu, the best way to avoid exposure is by:

- Washing your hands often with soap and water for at least 20 seconds. If soap and water are not available, use an alcohol-based hand sanitizer.

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- Avoid touching your eyes, nose, and mouth with unwashed hands.
- Avoiding close contact with people who are sick.
- Staying home when you are sick.
- Covering your cough or sneeze with a tissue, then throw the tissue in the trash.
- Cleaning and disinfecting frequently touched objects and surfaces.
- Also, surgical masks have not been proven to be effective because they may not be tight enough and allow droplets around the edges. However, masks prevent you from unconsciously touching your eyes, nose, and mouth, so they may offer a measure of protection.

Businesses where many people operate in close quarters should consider increased education and wellness efforts to prevent the spread of germs.