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## Myths versus facts about the swine flu

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We've been bombarded with what to do to prevent or mitigate the spread of H1N1, aka the "swine flu."

Should companies scrub the office from top to bottom if someone becomes ill? Are the new vaccines safe? Or should we even worry about this new flu?

With so many conversations of varying credibility going on around you about how to prevent swine flu infection, how do you separate myth from fact?

Here are few of the more popular myths circulating, followed by the reality:

**Myth:** Swine flu poses no real threat; it's just media hype.

**Fact:** President Barack Obama recently declared the H1N1 flu pandemic a national emergency. According to the World Health Organization, as of Oct. 17, there have been more than 414,000 laboratory confirmed cases of this year's H1N1 strain and nearly 5,000 deaths early in the season. Also, many cases go undiagnosed and unreported.

**Myth:** H1N1 outbreaks are inevitable and can't be prevented.

**Fact:** While it's too late to prevent the outbreak, we can limit the spread of the virus and thus diminish the risks associated with infection. The Centers for Disease Control recommends immunization to prevent infection in most of those who receive vaccines.

**Myth:** Naturally acquired immunity is better than immunity through vaccination.

**Fact:** The best way to gain immunity is through vaccination, according to health officials. Influenza strains change from season to season, so protection through immunization will prevent getting the disease from the current pandemic until new strains, and their new vaccinations, become available.

**Myth:** The swine flu vaccine is not safe because it is "experimental."

**Fact:** The H1N1 vaccine has been prepared in the same way as seasonal flu vaccines for the last 20 years. These vaccines have been used safely for years, so relying on natural or homeopathic methods to prevent the disease is unwise and dangerous, according to the American Academy of Pediatrics. The risk of getting the virus is without a doubt higher than any minor risk associated with getting vaccinated.

**Myth:** If you get a seasonal flu shot, you are also protected from contracting H1N1.

**Fact:** The strains of H1N1 flu and seasonal flu are not the same, so the vaccinations for both are different. To protect against both seasonal flu and H1N1, it is necessary to be immunized with both vaccinations, which are safe to receive at once.

**Myth:** If an employee or student gets sick, close down the office or school to stop the spread of the virus.

**Fact:** That's wasted time and energy and won't accomplish anything but hurting productivity. In reality, personal hygiene measures are among the best ways to prevent infection, including washing your hands with soap and water, using an alcohol-based hand sanitizer, cleaning infected surfaces, covering your mouth when you cough and staying home when you get sick, according to the Centers for Disease Control.

Being aware of the realities of H1N1 and the vaccine will help companies and employees create a safer, healthier working environment. Together we can limit the spread of the swine flu as well as the misconceptions surrounding it.

**Dr. Okun is the national medical director for U.S. HealthWorks, which has 151 clinics and work sites in 14 states, including two in Modesto**

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