

Emerging Health Issues in the Workplace

Due to emerging concerns such as flu pandemics and Methicillin-resistant *Staphylococcus aureus* (MRSA), workplaces are now dealing more frequently with employee-related health issues. Because of the many complicated privacy and employment related issues between employee and employer, it has become increasingly important that employers familiarize themselves with how these emerging health issues should be handled in the workplace. To address the range of benefit questions and employment-related liabilities, employers may need to address employee health issues as well as any workplace policies developed to comply with state and federal laws, including the Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA), Family and Medical Leave Act (FMLA), Genetic Information Nondiscrimination Act of 2008 (GINA), and the Health Insurance Portability and Accountability Act (HIPAA).

Workplace conversations regarding MRSA, or the Superbug, have increased within the past decade due to the emergence of community-associated MRSA infections. Once confined to hospitals and healthcare facilities, MRSA infections are now more commonly seen in workplaces, schools, fitness facilities and daycare settings.

A common bacterium called “staph” (*Staphylococcus aureus*) is found on the skin or in the nostrils of about 25 to 30 percent of healthy people and does not necessarily cause infections, or if it does, the infections are typically minor and can be treated with or without antibiotics. A staph bacterium

becomes a serious infection when it has developed a resistance to the methicillin antibiotics normally used to treat it, resulting in a newly resistant bacterium referred to as MRSA. MRSA is primarily transmitted by skin-to-skin contact or contact with surfaces or items that have come into contact with a person’s MRSA infection. Serious infections from MRSA can result on the skin, in the blood stream, bones and lungs.

The use of basic hygiene practices are encouraged for addressing many workplace exposures to the common cold and flu along with newer, emerging health concerns such as MRSA. Handwashing is the most basic means for preventing the common cold and flu along with the more serious infections such as MRSA. Other practices should include showering, protecting cuts and scrapes, avoiding contact with another person’s wounds or bandages, eliminating the sharing of personal hygiene items and properly cleaning of sheets, towels and clothing. The Center for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) has information and guidelines available that can significantly decrease the spread of infections in the workplace.

For more information on these guidelines, as well as resources regarding MRSA and the workplace, follow the CDC link www.cdc.gov/niosh/topics/mrsa.

