

What to do if swine flu visits your hotel



As the world gets smaller and our guests travel from city to city, country to country, and continent to continent, the opportunity to spread viruses and diseases increases dramatically.

In recent months, the current strain of flu, the H1N1 virus commonly known as swine flu, has gained a lot of media attention.

Let's take a look at what hoteliers can do to contain the virus and prevent it spreading further.

Transmitting H1N1

H1N1 is transmitted by droplets. The virus can live on surfaces after a cough, sneeze and even a laugh. Think of all of the surfaces in a hotel that a droplet could survive on – exercise equipment, TV remotes, bathroom fittings and door handles, cutlery, glasses, plates, napkins, lift buttons, tables - the list goes on and on.

The key to containment is diligent and continuous cleaning with antiseptic cleaners.

Symptoms

H1N1 presents itself as any version of flu. Victims have fever and cough, difficulty breathing, discoloured or pale skin, may be irritable and may vomit. Sometimes, the victim will begin to feel better only to have a second bout with another fever and even worse cough.

Treatment

Treating H1N1 is no different to treating regular flu. Drink plenty of liquids, rest and sleep, and take over-the-counter medication for pain and fever. Most importantly, though, employees must stay away from work and guests must be isolated as much as possible. Fevers in excess of 38°C/101°F should receive professional medical attention.

Plan your actions before your action becomes your plan

Assume for a moment that your employees suddenly start contracting H1N1. How will you continue to run your hotel when:

- 25% of your employees are off sick on any given day for two to three weeks;
- an employee who is obviously still sick returns to work;
- local schools get closed and, while your employees are not sick, they don't have child care in place so they must stay home;
- your suppliers can't make deliveries because they are short staffed as well;
- the local TV station airs a news feature about the swine flu outbreak at your hotel.

The antidote is careful planning, starting with your employees.

- **Observe cleaning practices**

Start with an employee committee that includes a management member from each key operating department. Establish an assessment process for cleaning practices in each department. For example, ask the food and beverage member to observe the cleaning practices of the housekeeping department to see if another set of eyes spots an opportunity to bolster cleaning regimens.

- **Seek professional PR advice**

Be prepared – seek professional public relations advice on how to handle the media frenzy. Have a short press release ready to use that states emphatically that management has the situation under control. Have copies ready to pass out to reporters that show up unannounced.

- **Training**

Train all employees on the dangers of H1N1 and how to prevent it – clean, clean and clean again, with the proper antiseptic cleaner for each surface. Label cleaning solution bottles clearly in multiple languages to avoid confusion and include the surface that the agent should (and should not) be used on. The best and cheapest cleaning solution is diluted bleach and water, but be careful of fabrics that might be damaged by the bleach.

- **Hand washing**

Hand washing skills are critically important and training should be conducted and observed by a manager or supervisor.

Use the hottest water possible with plenty of soap, vigorously rub hands together and get soap under the fingernails and in the cracks and crevices, for at least 15 seconds. Dry hands on paper towels or with hot air dryers – do not use linen or cloth towels that have been used before. In areas where gloves are used, remove the gloves and dispose of them properly. Never re-use gloves. Wash hands many, many times per day – housekeepers should wash their hands after each room is cleaned, for instance. After using the rest room, coughing or sneezing and before/after preparing or eating foods.

The sick guest

Consider preparing a pamphlet to hand out at check in advising all guests that the hotel is doing everything possible to prevent an outbreak. Encourage guests to do the same things your employees but, most importantly, call the hotel operator or front desk if a guest starts to feel ill. Plan to quarantine the guest in their room, providing plenty of soft foods and liquids (water is always best).

While controversy surrounds face masks, if you deem them appropriate, the hotel should pay for them. The best to use is an N95-level respirator type – not the flimsy cotton type seen on so many news clips. Used masks, if you decide to use them, should be treated as biohazard materials when disposing of them.

Always encourage sick guests to contact their own doctors, a local recommended doctor and/or local public health officials. Do not take the guest to a medical facility – you can jeopardize the health of your own staff and anyone at the facility or en route if you do that.

When a sick guest checks out, lock the guest room and thoroughly clean and sterilize it before it is occupied again. This may require you to double bolt the door locks and/or set your electronic key system to top security levels.

Most importantly, maintain records of your actions and recommendations, and the guest's responses, throughout the event. Detailed written records can be very helpful to local officials should the outbreak escalate.

More information

For more information on developing your own plan of attack, contact Hotel Solutions Partnership at <http://www.hotelsolutionspartnership.com/contact/contact.php>. We have experts ready to help you develop a comprehensive plan.

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