

Keeping productivity levels high at work as flu season begins

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Our hands are responsible for spreading around 80% of common infections. With flu cases up by 5% in recent weeks, simple preventative actions like handwashing remain one of the most effective ways to defend against illness. Research shows that washing hands immediately after contamination can reduce influenza infection risk by up to 50%.

Yet amidst busy working lives, even adults can become complacent with personal hygiene. But a small lapse can sometimes have big consequences, especially in shared spaces where one person's cold can quickly affect the entire team.

Why hand hygiene matters for wellbeing and productivity

Healthy workplaces start with healthy people. Minor illnesses such as colds and flu were the leading cause of short-term sickness absence in 2024. They were responsible for about 44.67 million lost workdays across the UK, accounting for approximately 30% of all absences. And when the chancellor faces a bigger hole in the public finances than expected due in part to productivity challenges, simple measures such as hygiene campaigns could make a big difference to boosting the nation's working hours.

Investing in hygiene awareness doesn't just protect employees but it also helps maintain morale, reduce absenteeism, and support consistent productivity. Office managers and employers therefore play a vital role in promoting proper hand hygiene practices, particularly during winter when infection risks peak.

How to strengthen handwashing habits at work

The World Health Organisation (WHO) recommends washing hands for at least 20 seconds. It is roughly the same amount of time it takes to hum or sing the “Happy Birthday” song twice when using clean running water and soap, covering your palms, the backs of your hands, between your fingers and under nails before rinsing and drying thoroughly.

However, separate research by the Food Standards Agency (FSA) found that the average handwashing time in a kitchen was between 8.65 and 11.1 seconds, demonstrating that in food preparation areas and possibly other spaces, handwashing routines could be falling short of what’s recommended.

Employers can take simple steps to drive improvement. First, posters should be displayed clearly in washrooms and food preparation areas, demonstrating the correct handwashing techniques. Hand sanitisers should also be placed in communal areas and meeting rooms, while in winter we also advise

running internal campaigns that use memorable slogans and reminders that encourage employees to ‘wash, rinse, dry and repeat.’

Encouraging employees to wash their hands at least five times a day, especially after using the washroom, before eating, or after coughing, sneezing, or returning from outside, helps turn good intentions into lasting habits. It’s also crucial not to overlook drying. Damp hands spread up to 1,000 times more bacteria than dry ones. Ensuring soap, paper towels, and dryers are well-stocked supports effective hygiene and signals that employee wellbeing is a genuine business priority.

Targeting the touchpoints

A single touchpoint, such as a door handle, kettle, or keyboard, can quickly become a hotspot for germs. Handwashing helps interrupt that chain of infection, but cleaning and disinfection is equally important. Touch-free technologies like no-touch dispenser can reduce cross-contamination. The WHO’s Global Report on Infection Prevention and Control found such measures like touchless dispensing, can reduce healthcare infections by up to 70%. Products such as surface skins antimicrobial pads, which release ethanol gel on contact, can reduce bacteria levels by over 90%, including harmful microbes like E. coli.

While sanitisers are valuable, particularly in high-traffic areas, they work by killing microbes rather than physically removing them. Handwashing with soap and water remains the gold standard, with sanitisers acting as an important supplement where sinks aren’t available.

Building a culture of hygiene and care

Sustained hygiene improvements come from education and example. Leaders who champion hygiene awareness help build workplaces where employees feel valued and protected. Good hygiene isn’t just a personal habit but a shared responsibility. By creating an environment that supports and rewards healthy behaviours, employers can reduce illness, improve satisfaction, and build stronger, more resilient teams.

What should I do if many colleagues fall ill?

When several employees become unwell in a short period, facilities and office managers should act quickly to reduce the risk of further spread. In these cases, a professional deep clean is recommended. Unlike routine daily cleaning, a deep clean involves a detailed assessment of the workspace and the thorough disinfection of all high-touch areas which might include desks, keyboards, phones, door handles, shared

kitchen appliances, and meeting room equipment. Specialist methods such as electrostatic spraying ensure disinfectant reaches hard-to-access areas, while UV disinfection can be used on sensitive electronic equipment to eliminate bacteria and viruses without causing damage.

A deep clean not only removes pathogens but also restores employee confidence in the safety of their working environment. Following this, maintaining regular touchpoint disinfection and clear hygiene communication helps prevent further outbreaks. Acting decisively sends a strong message that employee wellbeing is a genuine business priority and will protect health, productivity, and the overall resilience of the workplace.