Shot in the Arm for American Businesses: The Importance of Worker Vaccinations

When you think about vaccines, you probably envision a child cringing at the sight of a needle. But did you know that adults should get their fair share of needling too?

Vaccines aren’t just for kids. In fact, according to the National Foundation for Infectious Diseases (NFID), approximately 50,000 U.S. adults die each year from illnesses that could have been prevented by vaccinations. That’s more than the death rates for breast cancer, HIV/AIDS or traffic accidents.¹

American businesses should take note of the high cost of unvaccinated adults: The Centers for Disease Control and Prevention reports that the annual national economic burden resulting from a single preventable disease – adult influenza – is more than $83.3 billion. What’s more, 17 million workdays are lost each year due to influenza-related illnesses, which means the flu costs employers about $6.2 billion each year, primarily in lost productivity.²

What can employers do to help stanch the cost of vaccine-preventable diseases for workers and the nation at large? First, they should take steps to prevent the spread of illnesses:

» Sick workers should not be penalized for taking time off to recover. Instead, they should be encouraged to stay home until they are no longer contagious. Spreading the message that employees should use their sick days when they’re under the weather actually reduces absenteeism and increases productivity. Workers who stay on the job while ill share their germs with healthy workers, who in turn share them with others.

» Establish a corporate plan for operating during a pandemic, which is the outbreak of a disease that affects large numbers of people. In the event of a pandemic, businesses will experience increased absenteeism and lowered productivity. The Occupational Safety and Health Administration has prepared guidelines to help employers prepare for a pandemic.³

» Encourage employees to practice good hygiene by posting hand-washing signs in rest rooms and providing hand-sanitation stations.

What else can businesses do to protect themselves and their workers against the high cost of preventable illnesses? July is National Immunization Awareness month and the flu season is approaching, so now is the perfect time for employers to make sure their health care plans cover key immunizations that protect workers – not to mention workplace productivity.

The 2013 Aflac WorkForces report revealed that employees are woefully unprepared to cope with the high costs that can accompany illness, which includes communicable diseases that could be prevented by a quick shot in the arm. Sixty-six percent of workers surveyed by Aflac said they would be unable to adjust to the large financial costs accompanying an illness and just 16 percent said they were very or extremely prepared to pay out-of-pocket expenses that weren’t covered by major medical insurance.⁴

What’s more, NerdWallet Health recently analyzed data from a number of sources, including the U.S. Census, Centers for Disease Control and the federal court system, and found that to save costs, more than 25 million U.S. adults do not take their prescription drugs as instructed, including skipping doses, taking less medicine than prescribed or delaying refills.⁵ If workers won’t pay for medicine to control diseases that have already been diagnosed, it stands to reason they won’t ante up for vaccinations to prevent illnesses they have a chance of contracting in the future.
According to the CDC, employee health benefits affect workers’ willingness to seek preventive services and clinical care – and employers should provide preventive services such as immunization for vaccine-preventable diseases. The CDC recommends that employer-sponsored plans include coverage for:

- A diphtheria and tetanus booster every 10 years for workers under age 65, with one of the tetanus boosters replaced by a tetanus/diphtheria/acellular pertussis vaccine to protect against pertussis, or whooping cough.
- An annual influenza vaccine for adults age 50 and older.
- A human papillomavirus vaccine for women age 26 and under.
- Two doses of the varicella, or chicken pox, vaccine for people with no evidence of immunity, such as a history of chicken pox.
- A zoster, or shingles, vaccination for adults age 60 and older.
- Vaccinations against hepatitis A and B; pneumococcal diseases for workers younger than 65 based on high-risk conditions such as diabetes; measles, mumps and rubella for workers born after 1957; and meningococcal illness.
- Physician-recommended vaccines based on age, medical condition and other circumstances.

In today’s world, there’s no reason for preventable diseases to result in disaster. Adult vaccinations can protect against illness, hospitalization and even death. Employers should do the right thing for workers and their families by providing coverage for recommended vaccinations as part of their benefits plans. By doing so, they’ll reduce workplace absenteeism and increase productivity while experiencing significant savings: As mentioned earlier, the flu alone costs employers about $6.2 million annually. The CDC estimates the average lifetime, private-sector cost of providing healthy adults through age 74 with recommended vaccinations is $380 to $480.¹

Sources