

Hope to get a swine flu shot at work? Not likely

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In this photo made on Friday, Sept. 11, 2009, Terry Ketchum, left, the principal safety engineer at the Bayer Corporation U.S. headquarters, receives an injection against influenza by a company physicians assistant on their campus in the Pittsburgh suburb of Robinson, Pa. The initial doses of the new swine flu vaccine will only be given to young people, pregnant women and other high-risk groups. Businesses will have to wait until those folks have been immunized to get swine flu vaccine for their workforce. Unless they jump through lots of hoops that vary from state by state to get it, creating confusion for companies, like Bayer, with offices all over the country. (AP Photo/Keith Srakocic)

(AP) -- Plan on getting your swine flu shot at work? Don't count on it. The new vaccine will be rationed initially to groups most at risk of contracting the virus or developing complications - children and young adults, pregnant women, health care workers and the chronically ill.

People caring for infants will also receive priority.

Businesses may have to wait months to offer the shot, if they get it at all.

The regular seasonal flu vaccine is available a bit earlier than usual, and federal health officials recommend most people get that shot. Some employees are already lining up for it.

But the strain that's already a national fixture is swine flu. And for healthy adults, the vaccine will not be readily available.

"I would prefer to have it done at work. Everything's easier," said Tom Barclay, a 24-year employee of drug and chemical maker Bayer Corp. in Pittsburgh. "It's very convenient."

The first swine flu vaccine should be available in the U.S. sometime around the first week of October.

About 90,000 sites - mainly hospitals, clinics, doctors' offices, county health departments and pharmacies - are expected to receive doses. The federal government is covering the cost of the vaccines and related supplies, said Tom Skinner of the [Centers for Disease Control and Prevention](#). A total of at least 195 million doses are expected through winter.

States will get a share based on their population. Their health departments must approve or reject requests from health providers and other groups wanting the vaccine.

From California to Florida, states say they plan to make sure the initial vaccine supply goes to the 159 million people in the priority groups. Their rules vary slightly, but businesses are generally at the back of the line.

New York, for example, will only allow businesses with on-site medical facilities to get the vaccine. Other states, like New Jersey and Texas, say businesses can hire medical providers to administer shots, but only to staff in priority groups.

For many workers used to getting their seasonal [flu shot](#) free at the office every fall, that's frustrating.

Barclay, 56, head of emergency response for Bayer's Pittsburgh campus, said Monday he's gotten a seasonal flu shot every fall for more than a decade, and did so again last Friday.

But for protection against swine flu, he's planning to call his doctor - just as employers are telling their workers to do.

Most of Bayer's 15,000 U.S. workers aren't in high-risk groups, said spokesman Bryan Iams. So the company is providing information on swine flu symptoms and advising workers to consult their doctor about vaccine availability, follow strict hygiene rules and stay home if they get sick and get the [seasonal flu](#) vaccine as soon as possible.

"There's heightened interest in getting (seasonal) flu shots," more than at any time in at least 25 years, Iams said.

Other major corporations, from oil giant Exxon Mobil Corp. to software maker Microsoft Corp. and grocery chain Kroger Co., are taking similar steps. Whether companies will get any swine flu vaccine for their workers is generally unclear.

Exxon Mobil, based in Irving, Texas, has requested the vaccine from health departments there and in other states where it has employees, but is still in the dark, said spokeswoman Cynthia Bergman.

Microsoft of Redmond, Wash., finally got word Tuesday that it can offer swine flu vaccine to employees there if it has a pre-approved, licensed health provider to administer vaccines.

"We know that our vendor has been approved, and likely will get vaccine," said spokesman Lou Gellos. What remained unclear was whether that company would have enough for all the businesses it serves.

Despite all the uncertainty, about 43 percent of respondents to an ongoing survey by the National Business Group on Health have said they plan to provide [swine flu vaccine](#) to employees once the shots are available. Seventy percent said they'll pay the administration fee, even if workers get shots elsewhere. The group's members are mainly Fortune 500 companies and big public-sector employers.

For big corporations with multiple locations, slight variations in the states' rules are creating confusion.

New York plans to limit the vaccine to existing health providers - and businesses with on-site medical staff.

The Illinois and Chicago health departments, at least initially, are excluding businesses.

"As soon as we can, we'll open up the process to the population at large," said Dr. Craig Conover of the Illinois Department of Public Health.

In Florida, individual counties are handling requests, with pediatricians and other doctors with high-risk patients getting preference. Large businesses might get the vaccine - if they have a medical person on staff, said Steve Huard of the Hillsborough County Health Department in Tampa.

In states including California, Pennsylvania, New Jersey and Texas, a business can get the vaccine if it has a doctor, nurse or pharmacist licensed to give vaccines. Some states require those health workers to be company employees. Others will let a business hire a visiting nurses association or commercial company to provide flu shots.

Pennsylvania's health department will decide which businesses get vaccine based on where [swine flu](#) becomes most prevalent and how many workers are in priority groups.

In California, businesses will have to request the [vaccine](#) from approved health providers.

Laila Santos of Universal Wellness-Immunization Network, which conducts on-site flu clinics for companies in California, has been fielding daily calls from clients wondering when it will be available.

"Businesses are very, very concerned," Santos said. "With the economy, they cannot afford to lose employees and manpower because they're sick."

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