

DISABILITY ISSUES, WORKPLACE TIPS

ACHOO! ONE MEDICAL EXPERT'S TIPS FOR A HEALTHY WORKPLACE



It's that time of year: The holidays are over. The kids are back in school. Work is churning up new projects. Like it or not, those photos of beach sunsets you snapped just a few weeks ago are now relegated to your screensaver.

Coming off of the holiday highs, January can be a hard time to get back into the swing of things—especially when the sun is scarce and temperatures linger below freezing.

Combine gloomy weather with work stress and well-traveled germs, and staying healthy can be a challenge for the most health-conscious of colleagues. Meanwhile, getting sick would mean a whole host of new headaches: delayed deadlines, growing desk piles, lost wages or spent sick days.

Workplace Tip: Side-step the sick days

While you can't control the climate, you—and your employer—*can* take measures to protect your health. In fact, says [James Conway, MD](http://www.uwhealth.org/findadoctor/profile/james-h-conway-md/5759), professor in the Department of Pediatrics at the University of Wisconsin School of Medicine and Public Health (SMPH), it's in your employer's best interest to do so.

"To me it's a no-brainer that you invest in people staying healthy," says Conway, a specialist in disease transmission and prevention who heads the SMPH's [Division of Pediatric Infectious Diseases fellowship training program](https://www.pediatrics.wisc.edu/divisions/infectious-diseases). "Not only do you have some obligation to protect the people who are there, it's best for your bottom line."

1. Keep it clean

If you haven't already, now is the time for employers to post signs that encourage hand washing and [coughing etiquette](https://www.cdc.gov/healthywater/hygiene/etiquette/coughing_sneezing.html) (yes, that's a thing). "People will do the right thing if you make it easy for them," Conway says.



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to protect yourself, make good use of those alcohol-based hand gels and avoid touching your mouth, nose and eyes. Disinfect your own work area with wipes, and avoid shared workstations when possible.

Conway warns that some diseases like C. difficile and Norovirus are resistant to hand gel and are only eliminated with a [good handwashing](#) [<http://www.uwhealth.org/flu/handwashing-an-ounce-of-prevention/10370>]. But for the most part even medical professionals rely largely on the gel. "I'm a big fan of it," he says.

2. Get vaccinated

It is "absolutely not" too late to get this year's flu vaccination, Conway says. In fact, the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention's most recent [surveillance report](#) [<https://www.cdc.gov/flu/weekly/>] indicates that influenza-like illnesses are actually on the rise in many states. "We expect that it's going to keep going this way for at least the next couple of months." What's more, this year's primary circulating strain can be particularly virulent.

The good news is that this year's vaccine is a particularly good match and most health insurance will cover vaccination costs. See if your employer will consider scheduling an onsite vaccination clinic.

"For anyone who waited, it's still a good idea," Conway says.

3. Stay home

If you do find yourself under the weather, know [how to recognize flu and cold symptoms](#) [<http://www.uwhealth.org/flu/know-the-difference-between-a-cold-and-the-flu/10376>] and stay home.

In the case of contagion, employers should be the first to encourage your absence. Ask human resources to explore flexible leave policies that allow you to work remotely or at least not be penalized for calling in sick.

4. Invest in vitamins

Conway says, most people would still benefit from taking vitamins. "People who are really good about eating all the things on the food pyramid probably don't need [vitamins]," he says. "But in this crazy, hectic rat-race of a world, most people don't have time to eat a well-rounded diet at least on a reliable basis."

Look for a multivitamin that includes minerals like zinc and selenium. And never take massive doses of fat soluble vitamins like A, D, E and K.

5. Sleep it off

When all else fails, call it a day. Really: The amount you sleep directly affects your [brain function](#) [<http://www.uwhealth.org/news/sleep-spring-cleaning-for-the-brain/28345>] and [immune system](#) [<http://www.mayoclinic.org/diseases-conditions/insomnia/expert-answers/lack-of-sleep/faq-20057757>]. While you can't sleep away the entire winter, you can try to wind down at the same time each night and avoid scheduling early morning meetings—at least until your alarm goes off with the sun again.

"If we all lived in our own little bubbles we wouldn't have to worry as much," Conway says. "But if you are going to foster a group setting you do have some obligation and responsibility both to protect the people who are there and to help them stay healthy."

And why wouldn't you? "It's a win-win that you get happy, healthy employees who are able to do things," Conway reasons. "And then you don't need to worry so much about sick leave policies."

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