



Return to Work Safely

Our world has changed. When we watch the news or look around our communities and workplaces, we can't help but notice that change. The recent pandemic outbreak of the virus that causes the respiratory illness known as COVID-19 temporarily brought the entire world to a halt, with many workplaces shut down, schools closed, people confined to their homes and medical facilities overwhelmed. Now, for many of us, it's time to restart our lives and get back to work, but things have changed. It's possible that some things will never return to the way they were prior to the COVID-19 pandemic. One thing that hasn't changed: the need to earn a living and provide for our loved ones without placing our health and safety at risk.

FACTORS IN DETERMINING INFECTION CONTROL MEASURES

- During the early days of the pandemic, the guidance being issued to prevent the spread of COVID-19 was constantly changing, seemingly from one day to the next, as the medical community learned more about this new or "novel" coronavirus named SARS CoV-2.
- Now, the virus is better understood, as are the measures we must take in order to stay safe at work.
- Step one is to understand that people infected with COVID-19 can be contagious without experiencing any of the common symptoms of the disease. People who are contagious without showing any symptoms are called "asymptomatic carriers."
- However, people are thought to be most contagious when they are the most symptomatic, such as when they have a fever, a dry cough, a sore throat or shortness of breath.
- If you have these symptoms, stay home. Do not come to work.

THE SCREENING PROCESS FOR PREVENTING ENTRY BY POTENTIALLY CONTAGIOUS PEOPLE

- When certain risk factors are present, such as ongoing community spread, your employer will take steps to prevent employees, visitors and customers who may be contagious from entering the workplace.
- This will likely include a screening process that requires questions to be answered and temperatures taken before anyone is allowed to enter the facility.
- If you have a fever, or if you answer yes to certain questions, you will not be allowed to enter the workplace.
- The Centers for Disease Control, the CDC, considers a fever to be a temperature over 100.4 degrees Fahrenheit or 38 degrees Celsius.



RESPONDING TO COVID-19 SYMPTOMS

- If you have been exposed to someone who is infected, you can be contagious before showing any symptoms.
- Symptoms of COVID-19 appear between two and 14 days after exposure.
- Again, do not report to work if you are sick or likely to be contagious.
- If you begin to feel sick after reporting to work, report your symptoms right away so you can be properly evaluated and isolated if your symptoms are confirmed.

MODES OF TRANSMISSION

- In order to control the spread of the virus in our workplace, we must understand the various ways the virus can spread, or its “modes of transmission.”
- When an infected person sneezes or coughs, droplets of fluid containing the virus can be expelled into the air for a considerable distance and infect others if inhaled or by contacting a mucus membrane, such as the eyes, mouth or nose. This is known as “droplet transmission.” Droplet transmission is believed to be the primary means by which COVID-19 is spread.
- People infected with COVID-19 can also expel very tiny fluid particles called aerosols when they speak or breathe. These tiny aerosols may contain the coronavirus and can linger in the air for a considerable period of time and infect others if enough of these particles are inhaled or come into contact with a mucus membrane. This is known as “aerosol transmission.”
- The COVID-19 virus can survive on certain surfaces for several hours or days. When a person touches a contaminated object and then touches his or her face, eyes, nose or mouth, that person may become infected. This mode of transmission is referred to as “contact transmission.”

THE INFECTION CONTROL PLAN

- As part of the process for safely returning to work, your employer will develop and put into practice an “infectious disease preparedness and response plan,” sometimes called the “exposure control plan” or “infection control plan.”
- This plan will define the measures put in place by your employer to mitigate the virus’s modes of transmission and prevent it from spreading into the workplace.
- A typical workplace infection control plan for COVID-19 will include a physical distancing policy, a face covering policy, a sanitization and hygiene policy as well as administrative and engineering control measures and PPE requirements.
- As an employee, it’s important that you understand the purpose of each of these prevention methods and your role in making them successful.



PHYSICAL DISTANCING

- When community spread is ongoing or other risk factors are present, employers will require employees to maintain a physical separation of at least six feet, or two meters, whenever possible.
- This amount of physical distancing or “social distancing” can reduce the risk of aerosol and droplet transmission between employees.
- When this type of distancing is required, the number of people allowed into certain areas of the facility may be restricted and some work areas removed from service in order to obtain adequate spacing.
- Be sure you maintain social distancing while standing in lines, visiting breakrooms and cafeterias and when approaching coworkers performing their job duties.

FACE COVERING POLICY

- In addition to physical distancing, you may also be required to wear a face covering.
- A face covering or face mask can be used to reduce the risk of transmission by limiting the distance that infected droplets or aerosols travel when expelled.
- During times of community spread, or when other risk factors are present, local governmental agencies may mandate the use of a face covering for anyone who goes out in public.
- When this is the case, your employer will be required to follow local regulations and anyone entering your facility will be required to wear a face covering.
- Think about wearing a face covering the same way you think about covering your cough with a tissue or sneezing into your elbow. It is not only good social etiquette, but it protects others from getting sick.
- Keep in mind that the face covering policy where you work will be determined by the risk factors specific to your unique workplace and your specific job task. These policies will likely change as conditions change.
- Workers who perform tasks deemed to be “low risk” and are able to perform their work while maintaining a safe distance from co-workers and the general public may not be required to wear a face covering while performing their job or while remaining in their personal workspace.
- Even when this is the case, these workers may still be required to wear a face covering when leaving their personal workspace and moving about the facility. This is because it may be hard to maintain physical distancing in aisle ways, stairways and similar high traffic areas.
- You may also be asked to put on a face covering anytime you must work closer than six feet, or two meters, from others, when visiting the nurse or reporting the onset of symptoms, during the prework screening process or any other time you need to be in close proximity to a co-worker.



PUTTING ON AND TAKING OFF A FACE COVERING PROPERLY

- All employees need to know how to properly put on and take off a flat mask face covering.
- Before putting on any face covering, first make sure your hands are clean.
- Then, inspect it for any tears or holes and locate the metal strip in the mask.
- Orient the mask so the colored side faces outward, or away from you.
- Place the top part of the mask on the bridge of your nose and form the metal strip to the shape of your nose. Then, place the bands behind your ears.
- While holding the mask against your nose, pull the bottom of the mask down to ensure that it covers your nose, mouth and chin.
- Once adjusted, try to avoid touching the mask while you're wearing it. If you must touch or adjust your mask, be sure to clean your hands immediately afterward.
- To take off the mask, unloop the bands from behind your ears and carefully remove the mask without touching the front.
- Dispose of used masks in a closable trash bin and immediately wash your hands.

THE SANITIZATION AND HYGIENE PROGRAM

- Your employer's infection control plan will include a sanitization and hygiene program aimed at preventing contact transmission of the virus by encouraging frequent employee hand washing and the periodic cleaning of commonly touched surfaces.
- To prevent picking up and spreading the COVID-19 virus, you need to wash your hands, a lot.
- To properly wash your hands, use warm water and soap. Work the soap into a lather and make sure it covers all the surfaces of your hands, fingers and wrists.
- Work up and down each finger, your thumb, and also the back of your hand.
- Also, rub your fingertips in a circular motion firmly against all areas of the palm of your hand.
- Then, form a grip and squeeze your fingers together several times to force the soapy water under your fingernails.
- Your hand washing should last at least 25 seconds if it's going to be effective in killing the virus. The virus is protected by an outer layer of fatty material and it takes about 25 seconds for the soap to breakdown this fatty layer and kill the virus.
- When soap and water are not available, a hand sanitizer containing at least 60 percent alcohol can also be used.
- Keep in mind that most cases of contact transmission are self-inflicted and occur when we touch our face with unclean hands. This is a habit we all need to break.



CLEANING COMMONLY TOUCHED SURFACES

- Another aspect of the sanitization and hygiene program is cleaning commonly touched surfaces.
- Your employer's infection control plan will include a list of commonly touched surfaces to be cleaned, such as door handles, light switches, phones and similar items.
- The custodial staff or a contractor will likely take on this role; however, you may also be required to clean and sanitize your primary work area and related tools or equipment.
- There are a variety of sanitizing and disinfecting agents approved for this purpose. The Centers for Disease Control also recommends a solution of one quarter cup bleach per gallon of water as a sanitizing agent.
- A good rule of thumb is to sanitize the commonly touched items in your work area at the beginning of your shift.
- It's also a good idea not to use other workers' phones, desks, work tools and equipment, if at all possible.

SPEAKING TO YOUR SUPERVISOR ABOUT CONCERNS

- Your employer's policies related to physical distancing, face coverings and hygiene will be based on regulations or ordinances, infection statistics in your community and the risk factors at your facility.
- Therefore the control measures we are showing in this video may not align 100 percent with what your employer asks you to do.
- If you don't feel adequately protected by the infection control measures put into place by your employer, talk to your supervisor about your concerns, especially if you are at higher-risk for developing a severe illness from COVID-19, such as being older or having a serious underlying medical condition.

SUMMARY

Yes, the post pandemic world is different and it's likely to stay this way for quite some time. It's going to take a group effort for us to stay safe at work while COVID-19 remains a threat in our community, but the good news is, yes, we can stay safe at work. Perhaps one day soon, the type of protections mentioned in this video will no longer be necessary and your company's infection control efforts can be scaled back to reflect a reduced risk. Until then, we must all continue to do our part to stop the spread of COVID-19 where we work and in our communities.