



COVID-19 FAQs for Employers Preparing for Workers to Return to the Workplace

1. What is the ideal situation for returning to work?

Ideally, we would have the availability of sufficient testing capability to identify healthy individuals who were never infected, those who still have an active infection and those who have evidence of prior infection. There would be an unrestricted availability to perform tests, ideally through point-of-care tests and backed up by centralized testing. The emphasis would be on testing over temperature-taking, although, as an interim measure, taking individuals' temperatures with a touch-free device is a quick, painless and private way to screen workers as they enter the workplace, while understanding that taking temperatures may miss some asymptomatic individuals who could be infected and shedding the virus.

Unfortunately, it does not appear that sufficient testing will be available before various parts of the country begin to open up. To that end, this FAQ and the attached spreadsheets will provide guidance for those who may be asked to return to the jobsite.

2. How should I prepare the workplace?

Of course, businesses will need to comply with the state and local pandemic guidance. It is suggested that businesses develop a COVID-19 questionnaire for those re-entering the workplace to determine if they are ill or have symptoms. Additional training, signage, emails and other means should be used to inform and urge employees to notify the designated healthcare provider if they develop symptoms while at work or at home.

Businesses should establish routine deep cleaning of common areas, kitchen facilities and meeting rooms, with priority given to frequently touched areas. Disinfectants should be chosen from [List N of Selected EPA-Registered Disinfectants Lists](#). The cleaning staff must follow label instructions for dilution, appropriate surfaces, how to administer, length of time to leave wet, etc.

The Employees will need reassurance that surfaces are cleaned and disinfected regularly. Cleaning staff must be trained on proper disinfection practices, which include cleaning visibly dirty surfaces with a soap solution before disinfecting. Give disinfectant wipes to all employees and ask them to clean surfaces they often touch, such as keyboards and telephones and door handles. Employees should wear cloth face coverings at all times; pass out hand sanitizer liberally. Discourage workers from using other workers' phones, desks, offices, or other work tools and equipment, when possible.

Masks should be provided at the entrance to the workplace and donned after hands are washed or hand sanitizer is used. In some workplace areas such as laboratories where chemicals and biohazardous materials are handled, the mask should be removed and replaced with additional personal protective equipment such as a face shield, or worn and then discarded and replaced with a clean mask.

CDC Infographic on *Reopening America*: https://www.cdc.gov/coronavirus/2019-ncov/community/pdf/ReOpening_America_Cleaning_Disinfection_Decision_Tool.pdf

3. Are there additional engineering controls that could help stop the spread of the virus in the workplace?

Some engineering controls that could be considered, as appropriate:

- Installing high-efficiency air filters.
- Increasing ventilation rates in the work environment.
- Installing physical barriers, such as clear plastic sneeze guards.
- Installing a drive-through window for customer service.

4. What steps might I take for employees who take public transportation to work?

Employees should limit their use of mass transit if possible, since it is difficult to avoid crowded conditions and sick people on public transportation. Where employees must use public transport, they should wear a face covering and try to maintain social distancing. Employees should explore other methods of transportation (walking, biking, driving, etc.) or follow employer recommendations. Employers can deploy corporate vans or other forms of transport where hygiene and social distancing are easier to control.

5. What should an employer do to encourage social distancing?

Companies can continue to encourage telework and internet meetings. Not all meetings may need to happen in person even when people are back at the workplace. Employers should try, if possible, to reduce the density of workers. This might happen by splitting workers into groups and switching off who works from home and who comes into the office. Companies could allow staggered schedules, especially if people are taking mass transit and could thus avoid crowded rush hours.

Employers might also consider redesigning open floor plans or shop floors to allow for more distance between workers. Consider the Plexiglas dividers installed in some countries between restaurant tables.

6. What if a worker develops symptoms for Covid-19 while at work?

Where appropriate, employers should develop policies and procedures for immediately isolating people who have signs and/or symptoms of COVID-19, and train workers to implement them. Move potentially infectious people to a location away from workers, customers, and other visitors. Although most worksites do not have specific isolation rooms, designated areas with closable doors may serve as isolation rooms until potentially sick people can be removed from the worksite. Take steps to limit spread of the respiratory secretions of a person who may have COVID-19. Provide a face mask, if feasible and available, and ask the person to wear it, if tolerated. Have the employee contact the company designated medical provider or COVID-19 point person/personal physician for directions on how to proceed.

Infected individuals must not return to the workplace until symptom-free and in accordance with their company's policies for return to work.

Per OSHA guidance, it is suggested to not require a healthcare provider's note for employees who are sick with acute respiratory illness to validate their illness or to return to work, as healthcare provider offices and medical facilities may be extremely busy and not able to provide such documentation in a timely way.

7. What is the best way to minimize risk to workers for mealtimes?

Companies should encourage workers to bring food from home or have lunch delivered in prepackaged containers. Employers that operate a cafeteria can do so with increased safety measures, such as more training and supervision of the health and practices of food handlers. Self-service areas such as salad bars should not be offered. It may be safer to provide food under supervised conditions than encouraging employees to buy food nearby where crowds may gather, and hygiene practices may not be as scrupulous at the workplace.

8. What about meeting areas?

Businesses should limit gatherings to a modest size, perhaps 5-6 people, safely distanced from each other. Break rooms and kitchen areas should be closed or limited to the number of people who can congregate. If open, the kitchen cleaning should focus on commonly touched articles such as the refrigerator and microwave handles, sink handles, etc. Employees can take staggered breaks to avoid crowding break areas.

9. What about business travel and communication about the virus?

Employers should establish ways to communicate frequently about changes and updates, preferably done electronically via email or video. Consider designating a company point person to address all questions/concerns about COVID-19 practices.

Travel should be discouraged unless absolutely essential, and then consider if infection rates are low in the destination as well as the home city. Domestic travel will probably resume before trips abroad, to avoid the possibility of an employee being caught in a 14-day international travel quarantine. Refer to the [CDC Travel Website](#) for international travel precautions and recommendations.

10. What are other concerns that workers may have?

Workers could be absent because they are sick; are caregivers for sick family members; are caregivers for children if schools or day care centers are closed; have at-risk people at home, such as immunocompromised family members; or are afraid to come to work because of fear of possible exposure. Maintain flexible policies that permit employees to stay home to care for a sick family member. Employers should be aware that more employees may need to stay at home to care for sick children or other sick family members than is usual.

Older adults and people of any age who have serious underlying medical conditions might be at higher risk for severe illness from COVID-19. This could include people of any age with diabetes, high blood pressure, serious heart conditions, chronic lung disease, asthma, immunosuppression and pregnant women. Consideration should be given to modify tasks or assignments, such as

avoiding interaction with the general public, for someone in this category; consult with your medical professional.

11. What additional training should I consider for those returning to work?

Provide workers with up-to-date education and training on COVID-19 risk factors and protective behaviors (e.g., handwashing, cough etiquette, frequent disinfection of surfaces and care of PPE). Train workers who need to use protecting clothing and equipment how to put it on, use/wear it, and take it off correctly, discard or launder, etc. including in the context of their current and potential duties. Training material should be easy to understand and available in the appropriate language and literacy level for all workers.

References:

1. OSHA Bulletin OSHA 3990-03 2020: *Guidance on Preparing Workplaces for COVID-19*: <https://www.osha.gov/Publications/OSHA3990.pdf>
2. The Wall Street Journal: *How to Keep Workers Healthy on the Job*: <https://www.wsj.com/articles/how-to-keep-workers-healthy-on-the-job-11587311057>
3. Selected EPA Registered Disinfectants: <https://www.epa.gov/pesticide-registration/selected-epa-registered-disinfectants>