SafetyInfo

IS YOUR COMPANY READY TO RETURN TO WORK

Getting back to business as usual might look a bit different these days. Whether you have employees who are subject to a quarantine or isolation order, employees who are reluctant to return to work, or employees who tested positive or have related symptoms, you need to respond appropriately to keep your workforce safe, while maintaining productivity.

Having a plan in place can help you handle situations if or when they arise. The plan, however, should be flexible, as guidance continues to evolve. No one -size-fits-all plan will work for every organization. Response plans will need to be customized.

Many employers have gathered a select group of employees to act as COVID-19 response personnel which can include stakeholders from executive, HR, safety, facilities, and IT to name a few. They will help make policies, develop procedures, and lead communication and safety efforts.

Employers must be committed to achieving and maintaining a safe and productive work environment for all employees. This includes providing a clean, healthy, safe, and secure work environment. To achieve this, employers will likely take some or all of the following actions as employees return to the worksite:

- Perform employee screening before entry
- Monitor employee health status while at work
- Enable contact tracing of exposed employees
- Follow social distancing guidelines
- Provide for workplace sanitation
- Require proper hand washing
- Require and provide appropriate personal protective equipment
- Respond to a COVID-19 situation swiftly and safely, and follow pertinent leave laws

To help ensure a safe and healthy working environment, employees will be expected to adhere to all company procedures and guidelines. But what happens if, despite everyone's best efforts, the virus makes its way into the workplace? Read on to find out what you can do if COVID-19 tags along to work!

KEEPING EMPLOYEES SAFE AT WORK

You have obligations to provide safe work and a safe workplace. Part of that likely involves taking steps to keep COVID-19 out of the workplace. One such way is to make sure that no one enters the workplace if they have or may have the disease. This can include screening employees (and visitors) before they enter the building.

SCREENING AND MONITORING EMPLOYEES

In some jurisdictions, employers are mandated to screen employees before they enter the building, and this can include temperature scanning.

If you are required or wish to perform such screenings, you will need to determine which scanning equipment to use. Whichever methods you use to screen employees, they should be accurate and performed consistently.

It is required under the law that employees' medical information must be kept confidential; therefore, any information about temperatures must be treated as confidential medical information and kept separate from the general personnel files. This means that you should not disclose to the entire workforce which employee tested positive or was exposed.

Designate who will be responsible for employees' health information and determine which types of methods are used to collect the information, with consideration given to applicable state laws. Employees who develop symptoms while at work are expected to come forward. The employees may be asked health-related questions and have their temperatures taken. Employees who are found to have COVID-19 symptoms as defined by a public health agency, should be isolated from the rest of the workforce and sent home.

FOLLOWING ICMR (Indian Council of Medical Research) GUIDANCE ON CONTACT TRACING

As part of the response to an employee being exposed, having symptoms, or testing positive, you may ask the employee the names of other coworkers to which the employee had close contact. If any are identified, they should be notified of the potential threat. You should also contact your local public health agency regarding the exposure.

Digital contact tracing tools are available and can help collection efforts. Some allow for electronic self-reporting and can use location data to identify contacts who might otherwise be unknown. Other tools might use employee cell phones to identify when they got within six feet of each other, but the employees would need to have their phones with them. Some apps will even anonymously contact anyone with which an employee breached the six-foot distance for a period of time.

SANITIZING THE WORKPLACE

If an employee is at the workplace and complains of feeling ill, immediately isolate the employee and send him or her home. Then, determine where the employee was in the workplace so the area can be cleaned and disinfected. This means that all items and surfaces that the employee could have come into contact with need to be addressed.

Examples of frequently touched surfaces and objects that may need disinfection following possible contamination by the ill employee include:

- Machinery or equipment,
- Tables,
- Doorknobs,
- Light switches,
- Countertops,
- Handles,
- Desks,
- Phones,
- Keyboards,
- Toilets,
- Faucets, taps and sinks, and
- Touch screens.

If the ill employee was coughing excessively, that must be taken into consideration as droplets can travel and land on surfaces up to six feet away. Items or surfaces that have visible dirt on them need to be cleaned with soap and water before being disinfected.

Frequently touched surfaces and objects will need to be cleaned and then disinfected to further reduce the risk of germs. Follow these sanitizing steps:

- First, clean the surface or object with soap and water.

- Then, disinfect using an approved disinfectant.
- If an approved disinfectant is unavailable, you can use one third cup of bleach added to one gallon of water, or 70 percent alcohol solutions to disinfect. Do not mix bleach or other cleaning and disinfection products together. Bleach solutions will be effective for disinfection up to 24 hours.

When you are cleaning or disinfecting a hard and non-porous material or item like glass, metal, or plastic, use an approved product. You can also use diluted household bleach solutions if appropriate for the surface.

Pay special attention to the personal protective equipment (PPE) that may be needed to safely apply the disinfectant and follow the manufacturer's recommendations concerning any additional hazards. Always wear gloves appropriate for the chemicals being used for routine cleaning and disinfecting. In specific instances, personnel with specialized training and equipment may be required to apply certain disinfectants such as fumigants or fogs.

RECORDKEEPING

If an employee contracts COVID-19 at work, it must be treated as a work-related incident and recorded as such. An injury or illness is recordable on your Log if it meets all three of the following conditions:

1. It is work-related according to conditions defined in the law;

2. It is new according to conditions defined in the law and

3. It meets one or more of the general recording criteria.

Law says that a case is work-related if an event or exposure in the work environment either caused or contributed to the resulting condition or significantly aggravated a preexisting injury or illness. Basically, if an injury or illness happened at work, or while the employee was doing work for the employer, the case will be work-related.

AN EMPLOYEE EXPOSURE TO THE ILLNESS IN THE WORKPLACE IS NOT AUTOMATICALLY RECORDABLE.

Per standards, if an exposure to the novel coronavirus in the workplace led to an employee's illness, then it's considered a "discernible cause." In some cases, it may be easy to make this determination. Health care workers, for example, may be regularly exposed to people carrying the virus. In other cases, you may have an employee exposed to a coworker who tested positive for COVID-19. If the employee later becomes sick with COVID-19, that's a discernible cause.

A "new" case, according to the definition, is one that has not occurred before or that has occurred before, but the employee had recovered completely before an event or exposure in the workplace caused the signs and symptoms to reappear.

Work-related cases of COVID-19 would be new cases on your Log. But if a sick employee who had been self-treating at home later needed to go to the hospital for medical treatment, or in the worst-case scenario, died, you would need to update your records with the new information. You would not consider it to be a new case.

An employee exposure to the illness in the workplace is not automatically recordable. The exposure must result in signs or symptoms of the disease and be confirmed by a laboratory test. In addition, it must meet one or more of the general recording criteria.

Once an employee exhibits signs and symptoms, however, you must begin counting the days. In a situation where an employer sends the employee home to self-quarantine, the best practice is to begin counting the case on your Log when you send the employee home. That way, if the employee becomes ill with COVID-19, you have an accurate start date recorded. If the employee does not become ill, you may delete or line out the entry. Keep in mind that states may handle this differently.

If an employee is formally admitted to the hospital for in-patient care or treatment because of a work-related, diagnosed case of COVID-19, you must report it to the authorities. Worst-case scenario, if an employee dies because of a work-related case of COVID-19, the death must be reported to the authorities within eight hours. If an employee dies more than 30 days after the workplace exposure to COVID-19, you would not have to report the death to the authorities.

CONCLUSION

Working safely during the COVID-19 pandemic requires everyone to move forward together using recommended best practices and maintaining safe daily habits in order to reduce the risk of exposure. As health professionals continue to learn more about the virus, businesses must adapt to new processes and ways of maintaining a safe and legal workplace, especially as employees return to their jobs.

Employers should keep in mind that concerns related to COVID-19 may continue after employees return to work. In fact, some employees may be afraid to return to the facility, despite the steps taken to ensure a safe work environment. While refusal to return to work (absent extenuating circumstances) may be seen as insubordination, employers should try their best to work with employees and help determine reasonable alternatives.

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