

COVID-19



About Us

Vital Strategies is a global public health organization working in 70+ countries to strengthen public health systems. Resolve to Save Lives, an initiative of Vital Strategies, aims to prevent at least 100 million deaths from cardiovascular disease and epidemics. Through its Prevent Epidemics program, Resolve to Save Lives has rapidly leveraged existing networks to establish a multi-disciplinary, multi-pronged effort to support countries throughout Africa and beyond. This work is supported by Bloomberg Philanthropies, the Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation and Gates Philanthropy Partners, which is funded with support from the Chan Zuckerberg Initiative.

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Returning to the Workplace Safely

A Reopening Checklist for Office-Based Employers

As nonessential sectors are allowed to reopen after closures due to COVID-19, it is critical that employers carefully prepare to ensure the health and safety of both the workforce and clientele. Because a person with no sign of infection can transmit COVID-19 to others, a single infected employee has the potential to expose dozens of coworkers and clients. Therefore, a multi-tiered approach to workplace safety is paramount.

This checklist can be used to guide employers through the essential questions that need to be addressed as workers return to their offices in the context of COVID-19.

GENERAL/LEGAL CONSIDERATIONS

- ❑ **Ensure that reopening is in accordance with local government guidance.**
Localities and jurisdictions may have varying requirements for reopening and workplace re-entry, including specifications related to timing of reopening, occupancy, and sector-specific health and safety issues, etc.
- ❑ **Review public health guidance relevant to your sector or workplace.**
Federal, state, local and territorial public health agencies may have specific recommendations and guidance for each type of workplace, allowing for consideration of local and regional factors.
- ❑ **Develop protocols to ensure health information privacy.**
Special attention should be given to employees' right to privacy while tracking, reporting and possibly screening or testing for symptoms and infections.

COVID-19 PREPAREDNESS AND RESPONSE PLAN

- ❑ **Identify a COVID-19 coordinator or coordination team.**
A designated employee or team may be required to keep track of new policies and procedures, assist in their implementation and act as a liaison between the employer and employees on issues related to COVID-19.
- ❑ **Perform a hazard assessment of the workplace.**
Each workplace is unique. Identify places where there may be a higher risk of exposure for employees or clients, such as common areas or entry points. This hazard assessment should indicate what changes will be needed to ensure the safety of your workplace.
- ❑ **Define levels of risk.**
Different prevention measures are needed for varying levels of risk. Use existing guidance to determine the level of risk in your workplace. Risk level may depend on frequency of work-related travel, close contact with the general public or interaction with confirmed COVID-19 patients.
- ❑ **Adapt or create a business continuity plan that recognizes that closures may be reinstated.**
COVID-19 poses specific challenges, including to supply chains, human resources, downsizing and alternate business models that may not have been accounted for in other business continuity plans. Continuity plans should also consider the possibility that closures or lockdowns may need to be reinstated as the pandemic evolves.
- ❑ **Update evacuation plans.**
In the event of an emergency such as a fire, physical distancing guidelines may require adaptation of traditional emergency evacuation plans to avoid crowding.

SICK EMPLOYEES

❑ Establish policies and procedures that allow sick employees to stay home.

An effective strategy to prevent transmission in the workplace is to encourage sick employees to stay home. This may require changes to policies around paid sick leave, loosened requirements for documentation of illness and notification to employees about these policies.

❑ Establish policies and procedures to allow for identification and isolation of employees who become ill inside the workplace.

A protocol may be necessary for promptly addressing when an employee begins to develop signs and symptoms of COVID-19 in the workplace. This can include a chain of notifications to alert a supervisor or onsite occupational health worker, physical space for isolation of the employee experiencing illness, and means to get the employees home or to a health care setting if necessary.

❑ Inform employees of the steps necessary to return to work after recovery from illness.

Ensure that established guidance for returning to work after illness has been incorporated into existing policies and that employees are aware of these requirements.

BASIC INFECTION PREVENTION MEASURES

❑ Promote thorough and frequent hand-washing.

All employees, clients and visitors should have easy access to soap and running water and use hand sanitizer or alcohol-based hand rubs.

❑ Use signs to remind workers when hand-washing or use of hand sanitizer is encouraged.

Hand-washing or use of hand sanitizer may be promoted outside of traditional moments (i.e. after using the bathroom, before preparing or eating food), including at entry points, common doors and elevators, after sneezing, coughing or blowing one's nose, and anytime a face covering is removed or replaced.

❑ Limit sharing of equipment and workspaces.

When sharing equipment, such as printers or cash registers is necessary, provide means to clean and sanitize equipment between uses, or designate previously shared responsibilities to individual employees.

❑ Clean and disinfect the workplace regularly.

Clean surface with soap and water, then use an EPA-approved disinfectant. More frequent cleaning and disinfection may be required based on level of use.

INFECTION PREVENTION FOR COVID-19

❑ Practice physical distancing.

Whenever possible, employees should maintain 6 feet of physical distance from other employees, clients and visitors.

❑ Promote the use of face coverings.

Some localities may require face coverings in certain circumstances, such as on public transportation or in retail stores. Consider how face coverings may reduce risk in your workplace based on your hazard assessment. For example, employees may be unable to physically distance in some spaces, such as communal areas or meeting rooms, or they may interact in person with the clients or the public.

❑ Educate workers about the signs and symptoms of COVID-19.

Use signage and training materials, including virtual trainings, to help workers understand and recognize the symptoms of COVID-19.

ENGINEERING CONTROLS

❑ Improve indoor ventilation.

Work with workplace engineering and facilities management to ensure that indoor ventilation is working properly. Extra steps can be taken to disable demand-controlled ventilation, increase the proportion of outdoor air ventilation, improve filtration and reduce or eliminate recirculation.

□ Ensure water access and safety.

Basic preventive measures such as hand-washing and cleaning and disinfection of surfaces may not be possible without safe access to clean water. After prolonged shutdowns, some buildings may need additional attention to water systems.

□ Replace high-touch equipment with touchless versions.

Hand-sanitizing stations, soap dispensers, paper towel dispensers, and trash receptacles all have touchless alternatives. Consider using these when possible.

□ Install physical barriers where needed.

When physical distancing is not possible, physical barriers such as plexiglass shields may provide added protection for employees and clients.

□ Redirect walking traffic.

Consider one-way walkways where possible to minimize sharing of space. This may be especially useful in office spaces with rows of cubicles or offices where there are multiple ways to reach the same destination. Signage can help direct workers and clients and ensure physical distancing.

ADMINISTRATIVE CONTROLS

□ Determine a safe level of occupancy.

Given limited space and physical distancing requirements, it may not be feasible to have all employees in the workplace at the same time. Establish a new maximum occupancy that will facilitate good practices and guide your other workplace policies, such as working in shifts or remotely.

□ Allow for continued remote work options.

While some employees may be critical to operations and will need to return to the workplace as soon as it reopens, others may be able to continue working remotely or have more flexible reporting schedules. Others may have child and elder care responsibilities that may be best addressed with a flexible overall workplace policy.

□ Stagger shifts.

Stagger shifts to limit the number of employees in the workplace at the same time, and to help employees who use public transportation to avoid rush hours. Ensure that staff who are at increased risk of severe illness with COVID-19 have reasonable accommodation (e.g., continued telework, or work that minimizes risk).

□ Promote virtual meetings.

Many employees are now well-accustomed to virtual meetings. Some of these practices can continue even as employees return to the workplace, especially when collaborating with other organizations.

□ Address issues in common areas such as kitchens and break rooms.

Take steps to limit the number of people that can use common spaces at any one time and establish protocols and clear responsibilities for cleaning equipment between uses. When possible and relevant, use personalized equipment (e.g. mugs). If food is provided to employees, supply individually wrapped foodstuffs that can be stored in the employee's workspace rather than a common area.

□ Develop or adapt a collaborative communication plan.

Many of the policies and practices required for the safe return of employees to the workplace are new for everyone. Developing a two-way communication plan that allows managers to pass information to their workers, and for workers to share information with managers, will be critical for both compliance and adjustment to the needs of the workforce and business. Consider developing a reporting schedule early on to manage bottlenecks and challenges.