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Three Keys to Addressing COVID-19 in the Workplace

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The spread of COVID-19 has required safety professionals to reevaluate the steps they can take to protect the health of their workers.

Integrating pandemic planning into safety and health management systems is crucial to both preventing the spread of the virus and preventing future viruses from proliferating in the workplace.

As you take steps to address the virus among your workforce, keep these three points in mind.



1. Assess Your Workers' Risk Levels

A worker's risk level depends in part on the industry in which they work, their need for contact within six feet of people known to be or suspected of being infected with COVID-19 and if the worker is required to have repeated or extended contact with such individuals.

In its Guidance for Preparing Workplaces for COVID-19, OSHA identifies four levels of exposure risk:

Very High Exposure Risk: Jobs with high potential for exposure to known or suspected sources of COVID-19, which can occur during specific medical, postmortem or laboratory procedures. Occupations in this category include healthcare workers, healthcare or laboratory personnel and morgue workers.

High Exposure Risk: Jobs with high potential for exposure to known or suspected sources of COVID-19. This includes healthcare delivery and support staff, medical transport workers and mortuary workers who handle the bodies of individuals who were known to have or suspected of having the COVID-19 virus at the time of their death.

Medium Exposure Risk: Jobs that require frequent and/or close contact with people who may be infected with COVID-19, but who are not known or suspected of being COVID-19 patients. Such jobs include those who have regular contact with the general public such as workers in grocery stores, banks, schools and parcel shipping facilities.

Lower Exposure Risk: Jobs that do not require contact with people known to be or suspected of being infected with COVID-19 nor close contact with the general public. These workers have minimal contact with coworkers and the public. This includes many manufacturing and construction jobs such as machine operators, painters and electricians.

2. Provide a Clean Working Environment

Once you've identified each worker's individual level of risk, the next step is to institute controls to address those risks. COVID-19 risk management can begin with simple steps such as cleaning work surfaces and equipment.

CDC recommends routinely cleaning and disinfecting all high-contact workplace surfaces such as workstations, keyboards, telephones, handrails and doorknobs. If surfaces are dirty, they should be cleaned with detergent or soap prior to disinfection. EPA provides a database of disinfectants that meet its criteria for use in protecting against COVID-19.

CDC also advises that employers discourage workers from using each other's phones, desk, offices and other office equipment when possible. If equipment must be shared, it should be cleaned and disinfected after each use. Employers are encouraged to provide employees disposable wipes to clean and disinfect commonly used surfaces before each use.

3. Use the Hierarchy of Controls

Although creating a clean, hygienic work environment provides a good foundation in protecting workers against COVID-19 and other illnesses, safety professionals must institute additional controls to protect worker health. OSHA's COVID-19 hierarchy of controls offers guidance to take these next steps, with four classifications of controls:

Engineering controls: These measures include actions increasing ventilation rates, installing barriers such as sneeze guards between workers, offering drive through or curbside service for customers, installing high-efficiency air filters and using specialized negative pressure ventilation.

Administrative controls: These measures involve changes in work policy or procedure such as minimizing contact among workers and between workers and customers, establishing alternating shifts to reduce the number of workers in a facility at any given time and discontinuing nonessential travel to areas with COVID-19 outbreaks.

Safe work practices: Measures in this category include hygienic controls such as requiring regular handwashing or the use of hand sanitizer, and providing no-touch trash cans, tissues

and other personal hygiene resources to reduce exposure to COVID-19 and other illnesses.

Personal protective equipment (PPE): Along with instituting administrative controls, engineering controls and safe work practices, PPE such as gloves, masks and respirators provide workers with an extra layer of protection against COVID-19. When PPE is used as a preventive control, OSHA advises that all PPE must:

- Be selected based on the hazard to the worker
- Properly fit and be properly refitted
- Be consistently and properly worn when required
- Be regularly inspected and maintained, and replaced when necessary
- Be properly removed, cleaned and stored or disposed of to prevent contamination of workers or the environment

Listen to our podcast with Michael Serpe, president of SafetyFirstNA, to learn more about how you can address COVID-19 in your workplace.

Related Links

[OSHA Interim Enforcement Response Plan for COVID-19 Pandemic](#)

[OSHA Temporarily Suspends Some Recordkeeping Requirements on Work-Relatedness of COVID-19](#)

[10 Ways to Reduce Worker Exposure to COVID-19](#)

[OSHA Guidance on N95 Shortage](#)

[COVID-19: CDC Guidance on Returning to Work](#)

[How to Apply the Hierarchy of Controls in a Pandemic](#)

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