



Emergency Preparedness

How to Prepare for Possible Viral Outbreaks Within Your Workforce

Vanessa Jo Roberts | Feb 06, 2020

As the coronavirus fans out around the globe, continue to ensure your safety team is ready to manage possible viral outbreaks within your workforce. Here are tactics, recommended by OSHA and the CDC, to help keep your workers healthy and productive—even during a pandemic.

No doubt, coronavirus questions and concerns are top of mind for your workers.

"What will happen if this becomes an epidemic in our town?"

"How do we avoid catching it?"

"What will happen if I get sick, or someone in my family does, and I can't do my job?"

Those are just a few of the types of questions that your company's employees might have asked or will ask as the virus continues to infect people farther and farther from its Wuhan, China, epicenter.

"Workplace illness prevention training is imperative for all employees, and employers should provide it."

The National Safety Council

As the virus spread and before the *World Health Organization's declaration* of the still baffling novel coronavirus—also known as COVID-19—as a pandemic, business leaders worldwide already had begun to grow concerned about the economic effects of the illness that is now affecting businesses and financial markets worldwide.

OSHA Rules Require Coronavirus Preparations

"We are advising staff to be aware of the situation, close monitoring is in place, and staff health and safety is our top priority," a European bank leader said at the January *World Economic Forum* in Davos, Switzerland.

OSHA: Coronavirus Workplace Exposures Are Recordable Incidents

Typically, the Occupational Safety and Health Administration excludes businesses from having to report on employees suffering from common colds or the flu. But if there is a possibility that one of your workers contracted the coronavirus while on the job, you will need to report it.

While **29 CFR 1904.5(b)(2)(viii)** exempts recording of the common cold and flu, "COVID-19 can be a recordable illness if a worker is infected as a result of performing their work-related duties," OSHA shares on the [COVID-2019 website](#).

Be prepared to monitor your employees for possible symptoms and to fill out the OSHA 300 series ***injury and illness recordkeeping forms*** if any of your workers ultimately become infected with the coronavirus.

And that is the approach all companies should take, recommends the National Safety Council.

All businesses should "assess their risk of exposure and ensure procedures are in place to effectively control transmission," NSC says in a ***statement about the virus***. "Workplace illness prevention training is imperative for all employees, and employers should provide it."

While the long-term threat of the virus remains unclear for any specific business in the United States with employees who mainly work on-site and don't travel abroad, health regulations still require emergency plans for epidemics and pandemics.

The rapid rate of the transmission, including community and asymptomatic transmission, ***detailed by the Centers for Disease and Control***, has led to CDC recommendations for social distancing and, in an increasing number of states, for nonessential businesses to have employees telework from home.

We share insights and advice from an ASSP safety expert on how to manage manufacturing work crews during a pandemic.

The Occupational Safety and Health Administration points out on its ***COVID-19 guidance*** that "Existing OSHA standards apply to protecting workers from 2019 novel coronavirus."

Beyond the ***general duty clause*** that companies must protect employees from harm, OSHA emphasizes its standards about use of ***personal protective equipment*** for general industry and points to its guidance on handling of ***bloodborne pathogens***. On a ***detailed page about standards and coronavirus***, OSHA also points to other federal and state standards and regulations that businesses may need to take into consideration as well.

Coronavirus Resources Around the Web

- *American Society of Safety Professionals*
- *CDC*
- *Environmental Protection Agency* on antimicrobial pesticides
- *OSHA*
- *SHRM*
- *State Department*
- *World Health Organization* on coronavirus
- *WHO* guidance on managing epidemics

Right now, the CDC continues to recommend that the general public not wear respirators or disposable face masks. Respirators of all kinds are commonly used PPE in metalworking and manufacturing environments. But your business, at least now, does not need to have all employees donning them for purposes of preventing disease spread.

Did you know disposable respirators expire? 3M explains in “Why Do Disposable Respirators Have A Defined Shelf Life?”

8 Ways to Protect Your Workforce from Coronavirus Infection

Build on your existing preventive *flu season efforts* and emergency plans.

These are the eight suggestions shared by NSC, derived from CDC and OSHA recommendations—many of which should be part of your regular wellness strategies:

- Wipe down workspaces and pay particular attention to regularly *cleaning* and disinfecting areas prone to attract germs. (Note: Be sure to use *EPA-recommended cleaners* known to effectively kill the virus or a solution that is 70 percent alcohol.)
- Encourage workers to wash hands frequently with soap and water—for at least 20 seconds. The use of alcohol-based *hand sanitizers* with at least 60 percent alcohol is an option if wash stations are unavailable.
- Recommend that workers avoid touching their eyes, noses and mouths with unwashed hands since that can spread the virus.
- Suggest that workers avoid close contact with people who are sick.
- Ask that your workers stay home when they are sick and see a doctor immediately to be evaluated for COVID-19, if they develop flu-like symptoms and definitely if their risk factors (such as travel or known pre-existing health conditions) suggest possible infection with the respiratory virus.
- Insist that workers stay at home until fully recovered before returning to work when sick. The CDC provides *guidance on discontinuing isolation* both for workers who are ill and self-quarantining as well as those with confirmed cases of COVID-19.
- Ask that all workers inform the company if they have traveled to areas with heightened levels of exposure.

- Follow *U.S. State Department COVID-19 recommendations* on travel.

Have an emergency preparedness question? Click on “Ask the MSC Safety Specialists” in the Better MRO Manufacturing Forum.

How to Answer Employee Questions About Coronavirus

Preventing the spread of any infectious disease depends on engaging your workers. Open communications are important, notes *WHO guidance on managing epidemics*. “Disease outbreaks are often accompanied by the presence of false rumors and misinformation.”

To keep your workers informed, you might want to use a *safety moment* during regular meetings to talk about the coronavirus and share preventive measures the company is taking, and to address concerns and answer questions. Also, your safety team might want to make use of temporary extra *hazard communications and signage* to encourage healthy behaviors.

The CDC suggests monitoring the spread of the disease globally and keeping up to date on all COVID-19 information shared by public health organizations, which might change their recommendations as clinicians discover more about the coronavirus and how to prevent further infections.

A chief goal of your preparations should be to avoid panic.

The CDC advises that while risk is dependent on exposure, the fast-spreading respiratory virus is a “very serious public health threat.” It recommends that businesses and the public take appropriate precautions to help reduce further contaminations.

“The goal of the ongoing U.S. public health response is to detect new cases quickly and prevent further spread,” it says.

[Note: Updated on March 25, 2020.]

How has your company prepared for the coronavirus? How does it handle emergency preparedness generally?

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