



COVID-19: Best Practices for Returning to an Office Setting
May 20, 2020

The COVID-19 pandemic has profoundly changed the way that workplaces will function. For workers in office settings, returning to the office should not be business as usual. Workers will need assurances from their employers that the workplace is safe. One step the employer should take would be to collaborate with workers on preparing for reopening and in creating a series of safe work practices to reduce the risk of exposure to SARS-Cov-2 (the virus that causes COVID-19 disease).

Workers and employers can prevent and slow the spread of COVID-19 by working together. Both parties should plan to respond in a flexible way to varying levels of disease transmission in the community and be prepared to refine their operations as needed. According to the Occupational Safety and Health Administration (OSHA), most workers will likely experience low or medium exposure risk levels at their place of employment if proper safe work practices are in place.

Workers and employers are strongly encouraged to monitor state and local guidelines for changes in recommendations, cleaning strategies, wearing of facemasks and other safe work practices. Local conditions will influence the decisions that public health officials make regarding community-level strategies. For example, general guidelines regarding best practices, cleaning and disinfection, worker hygiene and physical distancing may change based on the progression of the SARS-Cov-2 virus. Workers and employers should also consider developing a committee of safety leaders to assess, implement and coordinate new COVID-19 transmission mitigation strategies as they become available and consider how they relate to their workplace.

Reopening a workplace cannot happen blindly. A special emphasis on workplace configuration, meeting rooms, lobby and common areas, kitchens, restrooms, temperature, humidity, ventilation and enhanced cleaning practices must take place. Additionally, communication and training on site plans, policies and procedures will be essential to the health and welfare of all workplace staff. Regardless of workplace sector or size, all these aspects should be considered to ensure safety and health in the workplace.

Office Space Configuration

Prior to opening the workplace, perform a detailed review of the configuration of your workspaces and consider:

- Eliminating reception seating areas and require clients, visitors and guests to phone ahead for a specific time to enter the workplace.
- Installing a plastic partition at the reception area and in spaces where one-on-one meetings are conducted to provide a barrier between the public and office staff.
- Reviewing floorplans and removing or reconfiguring seats, furniture and workstations to achieve physical distancing in accordance with guidelines (generally six feet).
- Reconfiguring workstations so that employees do not face each other or installing partitions (plastic or other material) if facing each other cannot be avoided.

Meeting Rooms

If in-person meetings are essential, consider limiting the size of the meetings in accordance with local, state and federal guidelines. In-person meetings should only take place if physical distancing can be achieved. Meeting rooms that are used should be disinfected regularly and after each use. Disinfectant wipes or spray should be left in each conference room, and employees should be encouraged to wipe down all surfaces and equipment (e.g., mouse, keyboard, phone) touched during conference room meetings. Linger and socializing before and after meetings should be discouraged, and employees should be encouraged to use virtual meeting tools, including phone and virtual teleconference, in lieu of in-person meetings, whenever possible.

Lobby and Common Areas

Common areas (e.g., lobby, security check-in, delivery receiving areas) should be cleaned and disinfected at least daily. Signage should be prominently displayed encouraging staff and visitors to:

- Follow physical distancing measures.
- Practice good personal and environmental hygiene (e.g., handwashing, respiratory etiquette, cleaning frequently touched objects).
- Respect occupancy limits.
- Not linger or socialize in common areas and around building entrances and exits or loading docks.

Additionally, workplaces should eliminate literature, pamphlet and promotional tables from common areas. If feasible, workplaces should end cash transactions and move to an electronic or pre-payment system for goods, permits, fees, etc. Where kiosks and electronic portals are used to obtain services, all portals, pens and styluses should be disinfected after each use. Disinfectant, cleaning supplies and hand sanitizer with at least 60% alcohol should be made available for visitors to use in common areas.

Breakrooms

Breakroom areas should be cleaned and disinfected at least twice daily. A special emphasis on cleaning should take place after typical break times (coffee and lunch hours). Congregating in kitchen areas should be discouraged, and the occupancy of the space should be limited to achieve physical distancing.

Kitchen equipment and utensils should also be cleaned on a routine basis, including coffee machines, refrigerator handles, dishwashers, microwaves, toasters, water and beverage faucets and ice machine handles.

All silverware, dinnerware, utensils and coffee pots should be cleaned in the dishwasher. This helps ensure thorough cleaning and disinfection. If silverware and dishes cannot be kept clean and covered, disposable individually wrapped options are recommended.

Ice machines that require a handheld scoop should be disconnected and taken out of service.

If vending machines are available for employee use, disinfecting should be required after each use. Eliminate public access to vending machines.

Restrooms

Keep bathrooms clean and disinfect them on a consistent basis. Limit occupancy if a multi-stall restroom exists. Provide disposable, foldable paper towels that can be dispensed freely, without having to touch a handle on a dispenser; or install automated touch-free dispensing machines. Disconnect or tape-off hand air dryers. Doors to restrooms should be able to be opened and closed without touching handles if possible. For bathrooms intended for staff use only, provide a key to each employee so disinfection measures can be better controlled. Additionally, workplaces should:

- Place a trash can and disposable towels by the door if the door cannot be opened without touching the handle.
- Place signs indicating that toilet lids (if present) should be closed before flushing. SARS-COV-2 may be aerosolized when flushing the toilet.
- Place signs asking employees and the public to wash hands before and after using the restroom.
- Clean and disinfect restrooms available for public use on an hourly basis.
- Vent separately where possible (e.g., turn exhaust fan on if vented directly outdoors and run fan continuously).
- Keep bathroom windows closed if open windows could lead to re-entrainment of air into other parts of the building (i.e., if the exhausted air could re-enter the building through air intakes or other openings).
- Have an ample supply of hand soap and sanitizer available for use.

Ventilation, Temperature and Humidity

Proper temperature and humidity and adequate flow of fresh air to workspaces is essential. Ventilation and filtration provided by heating, ventilating and air-conditioning systems can reduce the airborne concentration of SARS-CoV-2 and thus the risk of transmission through the air.

Disabling of heating, ventilating and air-conditioning systems is not a recommended measure to reduce the transmission of the virus.

Workers and employers should consult with building owners and HVAC technicians to ensure maximum flow of fresh air is passing through the ventilation system. Additional steps that can be taken include:

- Ensuring restrooms are under negative pressure.
- Cleaning and disinfecting all HVAC intakes and returns daily.
- Making certain that the proper filtration to control SARS-CoV-2 transmission (minimum efficiency reporting value ≥ 13) is being used, instead of less effective filtration that might otherwise be recommended for normal office use.
- When feasible, disinfecting filters with a 10% bleach solution or another appropriate disinfectant, approved for use against SARS-CoV-2, before removal. Filters (disinfected or not) can be bagged and disposed of in regular trash.
- Maintaining temperature at 68.5-75°F in the winter, and from 75-80.5°F in the summer.
- Maintaining relative humidity at 40-60% throughout the year.

Other important considerations include the use of portable and hard mounted fans. If these fans are used, take steps to minimize air from fans blowing from one person directly to another. Inspect windows and doors prior to reopening to ensure there are no leaks.

Cleaning and Disinfecting

Based on what is currently known about SARS-CoV-2, transmission of this coronavirus occurs much more commonly through respiratory droplets than through contact with surfaces and objects. However, current evidence suggests that SARS-CoV-2 may remain viable for hours to days on surfaces made from a variety of materials (plastics, glass, metal, linens, wood and cardboard). Cleaning of visibly dirty surfaces followed by disinfection is a best practice measure for prevention of COVID-19 and other viral respiratory illnesses in workplaces.

Employers should implement and workers should engage in routine cleaning of frequently touched surfaces (e.g., tables, doorknobs, light switches, handles, desks, toilets, faucets and sinks) with EPA registered disinfectants that are appropriate for surfaces and objects, following label instructions. Labels contain instructions for safe and effective use of the cleaning product, including precautions you should take when applying the product. Additionally, a Safety Data Sheet (SDS) should be available with each product available for employee use.

Employers are responsible for ensuring that workers are protected from exposure to SARS-CoV-2, including workers tasked with cleaning surfaces that may be contaminated with SARS-CoV-2. Employers are also required to make sure workers are protected from exposure to harmful levels of chemicals used for cleaning and disinfection. Employers must select personal protective equipment (PPE) that will protect workers against SARS-CoV-2 and hazards associated with chemicals to which they may be exposed. Workers must wear PPE to help minimize exposure to the virus and chemicals through inhalation, contact or ingestion. Examples of PPE that may be needed during cleaning and decontamination include:

- Nitrile gloves.

- Goggles or face shields.
- Fluid-resistant or fluid-impermeable gowns, coveralls and aprons.
- Dedicated work clothing and washable shoes with shoe or boot covers.
- Facemasks (e.g., surgical masks) that cover the nose and mouth. In some cases, additional respiratory protection (e.g., N95, powered air-purifying respirators or better) may be necessary to protect workers from exposure to SARS-CoV-2 or disinfectants.

Workers must receive training on and demonstrate an understanding of:

- When to use PPE.
- Which PPE is necessary.
- How to properly don, use and doff PPE in a manner to prevent self-contamination.
- How to properly dispose of or disinfect and maintain PPE.
- The limitations of PPE.

Any reusable PPE must be properly cleaned, decontaminated and maintained after and between uses. Facilities should have policies and procedures describing a recommended sequence for safely donning and doffing PPE. Depending on the hazards posed by the size of a spill, degree of contamination or other factors, required PPE may be different than what is described in this fact sheet.

Communication

Workers and employers should collaborate and designate an effective means of communicating information on new workplace policies and changes prior to reopening and upon resuming operations. A communication policy that establishes formal and informal routes of communication for staff to express concerns, questions, comments and feedback is a necessity.

Consistent communication should include information on disinfection schedules, reporting policies for symptomatic staff, sick leave policies and health and safety protections in place. Additionally, communication on changes in hours of operations and building closures or limited building access will be required. If the workplace is in a multi-tenant location, a communication vehicle with other tenants to inform of potential and confirmed COVID-19 cases present in the building should be established.

Training

Education and training are important tools for informing staff about workplace hazards and controls so they can work more safely and be more productive. Another role of education and training, however, is to provide staff with a greater understanding of new workplace policies and changes, so that they can contribute to their development and implementation.

Education and training opportunities provide employers, managers, supervisors and workers with:

- Knowledge and skills needed to do their work safely and avoid exposure to SARS-Cov-2 that could place themselves or others at risk.
- Awareness and understanding of policies and procedures and how to identify, report and control exposure to SARS-Cov-2.

- Specialized training when their work involves unique hazards.

Staff should receive, at minimum, awareness training on cleaning and disinfection products used in the workplace; proper handwashing; physical distancing and other workplace protections; and all related policies and procedures. For staff who will use disinfectants and cleaners, training should also include proper use, PPE, disposal and all precautionary measures.

Additional Resources and Source Material

American Federation of State, County and Municipal Employees, Coronavirus: Public Service Workers on the Frontlines Resources and Factsheets. <https://bit.ly/35KmEEg>.

United States Environmental Protection Agency, List N: Disinfectants for Use Against SARS-CoV-2 (COVID-19). <https://bit.ly/2WBDVv7>.

U.S. Department of Labor, Occupational Safety and Health Administration, Guidance on Preparing Workplaces for COVID-19. <https://bit.ly/2SNaV26>.

American Society of Heating, Refrigerating and Air-Conditioning Engineers, Ventilation and Disinfection. <https://bit.ly/3fxdnDT>.

Some of the information found in the following subsections of this document was sourced from the American Industrial Hygiene Association, Reopening: Guidance for General Office Settings. <https://bit.ly/35HiNaI>.

Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, Interim Guidance for Businesses and Employers to Plan and Respond to Coronavirus Disease 2019 (COVID-19). <https://bit.ly/2LeyIUy>.

U.S. Department of Labor, Occupational Safety and Health Administration, OSHA Brief, Hazard Communication Standard: Safety Data Sheets. <https://bit.ly/2WgaKi8>.