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How to Manage Respiratory Viruses in the Workplace

Protecting employees from work-related injuries and illnesses is a tough job. Not only must you address the known hazards that workers face on a daily basis, you must also prepare for emerging threats that could wreak havoc on the business. Such is the case with COVID-19, known simply as coronavirus disease, or coronavirus. Suddenly a health crisis occurring halfway across the world has made its way into our country, posing a risk to workers in our very own communities. Although the World Health Organization has yet to officially declare the coronavirus a pandemic, it is just a matter of time as the number of cases spikes across the globe.

What can employers do to help keep their employees healthy and ensure the continuity of business operations as the situation in the United States escalates? For starters, every company should immediately implement infection control practices throughout their organization. Now is also the time for companies to develop or fine-tune their outbreak response plan.

When considering how to react to a potential pandemic, it might help to think back to 2009. That spring, a novel influenza A virus, known as H1N1 or swine flu, emerged that was first detected in the United States and then quickly spread throughout the world. Lessons learned from that outbreak have helped agencies such as the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) determine the best path forward when it comes to handling the coronavirus. The good news is that virtually all of the infectious disease control practices that were used back then to successfully deal with H1N1 now also apply to coronavirus.

Infection Control: Dealing with a Respiratory Virus in the Workplace

Both the coronavirus and influenza (flu) are infectious respiratory illnesses. Worldwide, there have been more than 3,200 deaths from the coronavirus. But, just to put things in perspective, the CDC estimates that the flu was associated with more than 35.5 million illnesses, 16.5 million medical visits, 490,600 hospitalizations and 34,200 deaths during the 2018–2019 flu season.

The symptoms of the coronavirus and flu are similar; both can cause fever, cough, fatigue and shortness of breath. Both viruses can cause mild to severe symptoms and both can result in death. In addition, both are spread from person to person through infectious droplets. Specifically, respiratory droplets that are produced when an infected person coughs or sneezes can land in the mouths or noses of people who are nearby or possibly be inhaled into their lungs. A person may also become infected with the coronavirus or the flu by touching a surface or object that has the virus on it and then touching his or her own mouth, nose or eyes, although this is not the primary method of transmission for either illness.

Despite all of these similarities, there are some differences between the coronavirus and the flu. For starters, the coronavirus is a single virus. The flu, conversely, is mainly caused by two different types of viruses — the influenza A and B viruses — which is why we often hear reference to specific strains of the flu.

Perhaps the most significant difference between the coronavirus and the flu is that there are vaccines to prevent specific flu strains, whereas there is no vaccine to treat the coronavirus, and we likely won't see one for more than a year.

Action Items for Employers

Given the current situation, and the fact that we are in peak flu season, employers should take the following actions to reduce the risk of on-the-job exposure:

Actively Encourage Sick Employees to Stay Home: Employers should develop flexible-leave policies that encourage workers to stay home without penalty if they are sick. Employees who have symptoms of acute respiratory illness are advised not to come to work until they are free of fever (100.4° F or greater), as well as any signs of a fever or other symptoms for at least 24 hours, without the use of fever-reducing or other symptom-altering medicines (e.g., cough suppressants). Employees should notify their supervisor and stay home if they are sick.

Develop a Policy for Workers Who Become Ill in the Workplace: The policy should include a determination as to whom will be responsible for assisting ill individuals, as well as establish at least one individual to serve as the "contact person" if someone becomes sick in the workplace.

The CDC recommends that employees who appear to have acute respiratory illness symptoms (i.e., cough, shortness of breath) on arrival to work or become sick during the day be separated from other employees and be sent home immediately. Additional items in such a policy might include procedures on how to separate ill workers from others and what protective gear to provide to an ill worker (e.g., a face mask to try and prevent airborne transmission) until he or she can go home.

Promote Hand Hygiene and Cough Etiquette: Employers should display posters throughout the workplace that inform workers, visitors and clients of the steps for proper hand hygiene and cough etiquette.

Basic hand hygiene includes:

- Washing hands after blowing your nose, coughing, sneezing or coming into contact with mucus or contaminated objects and surfaces
- Applying soap and water: rub soapy hands together for at least 20 seconds, rinse with water and dry completely
- Using an alcohol-based hand sanitizer if soap and water are not available

Basic cough etiquette includes:

- Covering coughs and sneezes with a tissue, or coughing and sneezing into your upper sleeve(s)
- Disposing of used tissues in "no-touch" wastebaskets

All workers, visitors and clients should have easy access to supplies such as:

- "No touch" wastebaskets for used tissues
- Soap and water
- Alcohol-based hand sanitizer
- Disposable towels
- Cleaning and sanitation materials

What about face masks?

- At this time, the CDC says that face masks should be worn by people who show symptoms of illness to help prevent the spread of the disease.
- As a preventive step, face masks may help protect against infection where exposure is likely, such as in hospitals and other healthcare settings.

Keep the Workplace Clean: Equipment, tools and machinery should be cleaned at regular intervals with disinfecting wipes. Focus on buttons, handles and other areas that employees touch. Clean and disinfect frequently used objects and surfaces, such as door knobs, railings, elevator buttons, lunch and break room tables, etc.

Address Travel: Companies may want to reconsider business travel to areas with high illness rates. Employers can see up-to-date travel advisories regarding the coronavirus by visiting www.cdc.gov/coronavirus/2019-ncov/travelers/index.html.

The CDC recommends the following measures for workers who travel:

- Advise workers to check themselves for fever and any other signs of flu-like illness before traveling and to notify their supervisors and stay home if they feel ill.
- Advise workers who become ill during a trip to notify their supervisors.
- Workers who become ill and are concerned about their illness should promptly call a healthcare provider.

Additional Considerations

The CDC recommends that employees who are well but who have a sick family member at home with the coronavirus should notify their supervisor and refer to CDC guidance for how to conduct a risk assessment of their potential exposure.

If an employee is confirmed to have the coronavirus, employers should inform fellow employees of their possible exposure in the workplace but maintain confidentiality as required by the Americans with Disabilities Act. Employees exposed to a co-worker with confirmed coronavirus should also refer to CDC guidance on how to conduct a risk assessment of their potential exposure.

Identify Potential Sources of Exposure: The Occupational Safety and Health Administration states that when assessing potential hazards, employers should consider whether their workers may encounter someone infected with the coronavirus in the course of their duties. Employers should also determine if workers could be exposed to environments (e.g., work sites) or materials (e.g., laboratory samples, waste) contaminated with the virus.

Depending on the work setting, employers may also rely on identification of sick individuals who have signs, symptoms and/or a history of travel to coronavirus-infected areas to help determine exposure risks for workers and implement appropriate control measures.

Preparing for a Coronavirus Pandemic: Developing Your Outbreak Response Plan

A pandemic is a global outbreak of a new disease. The most recent example to impact the United States was the H1N1 influenza pandemic that began in 2009. It is likely that the coronavirus will be the next pandemic. Countries have already taken measures such as border closures and travel restrictions to delay arrival of the virus, but new cases in different regions of the world are being documented every day.

A pandemic could have a major effect on the global economy. The coronavirus has already had a negative impact on travel and tourism, as well as financial markets.

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CDC Publishes Guidelines

As was the case in 2009, it is important that businesses prepare for high infection rates among workers. The CDC advises that all employers have an infectious diseases outbreak response plan in place to deal with the coronavirus as it continues to spread in the United States. The plan should cover the following:

- Identify possible work-related exposure and health risks to your employees.
- Review human resources policies to ensure that policies and practices are consistent with public health recommendations and are consistent with existing state and federal workplace laws
- Explore whether you can establish policies and practices — such as flexible work telecommuting and flexible work hours — to increase the physical distance among employees and between employees and others if state and local health authorities recommend the use of social distancing strategies.
- For employees who are able to telework, supervisors should encourage employees to remain at home instead of coming into the workplace until symptoms are completely resolved. Ensure that you have the information technology and infrastructure needed to support multiple employees who may be able to work from home.
- Identify essential business functions, essential jobs or roles and critical elements within your supply chains (e.g., raw materials, suppliers, subcontractor services/products and logistics) required to maintain business operations. Plan for how your business will operate if there is increasing absenteeism or if these supply chains are interrupted.
- Set up authorities, triggers and procedures for activating and terminating the company's infectious diseases outbreak response plan, altering business operations (e.g., possibly changing or closing operations in affected areas) and transferring business knowledge to key employees. Work closely with your local health officials to identify these triggers.
- Plan to minimize exposure between employees and also between employees and the public, if public health officials call for social distancing.
- Establish a process to communicate information to employees and business partners on your infectious diseases outbreak response plans and latest coronavirus information.
- In some communities, early childhood programs and K-12 schools may be dismissed, particularly if the outbreak worsens. Determine how you will operate if absenteeism spikes from increases in sick employees, those who stay home to care for sick family members and those who must stay home to watch their children if dismissed from school. Businesses and other employers should prepare to institute flexible workplace and leave policies for these employees.
- Local conditions will influence the decisions that public health officials make regarding community-level strategies; employers should take the time now to learn about plans in place in each community where they have a business.
- If there is evidence of a coronavirus outbreak in the United States, consider canceling non-essential business travel to additional countries per travel guidance on the CDC website.
- Travel restrictions may be enacted by other countries, which may limit the ability of employees to return home if they become sick while on travel status.
- Consider canceling large work-related meetings or events.

Don't Panic — Prepare

Unlike other natural and man-made disasters, a pandemic can linger for an extended period, hitting the population in waves. A business should monitor health information sources both locally and nationally for any updates on future waves, and adjust its recovery procedures as necessary.

The CDC advises employers to contact state and regional health departments for more information:

- **State Health Department Contact List: www.cste.org/page/EpiOnCall**
- **Directory of Local Health Departments: www.naccho.org/membership/lhd-directory**

Finally, the key to dealing with the coronavirus is not to panic but to prepare. Experts emphasize that, similar to the seasonal flu, most people who are actually infected with the virus will eventually recover. However, as the CDC says, it is important to anticipate employee fear, anxiety, rumors and misinformation, and plan your communications accordingly. That is, be ready to address concerns and publicize your company's action plan for dealing with the virus.

Clement Communications has a variety of products to help educate employees about virus protection in the workplace. For more information, visit **www.clement.com/safety-training/virus-protection.html** or call **1-800-253-6368.**

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