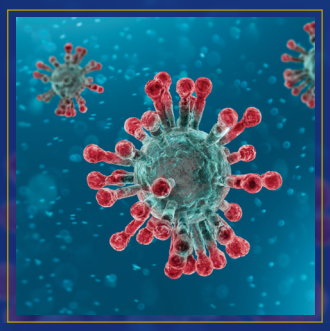

OSHA Alert

New Guidance on Protecting Workers and Mitigating the Spread of COVID-19 in the Workplace

What is the Coronavirus?

Coronavirus Disease 2019 (COVID-19) is a respiratory disease caused by the Severe Acute Respiratory Syndrome (SARS)-CoV-2 virus. The current mutation is a new strain of the SARS virus and no individual has any immunity prior to an exposure. The CDC has reported that testing has begun on a vaccine but for now, everyone should prepare and plan for possible impacts resulting from COVID-19. It has spread from China to many other countries around the world, including the United States.

On Friday, January 29th, 2021, OSHA released a press notice, (https://www.dol.gov/newsroom/releases/osha/osha20210129) on new guidance related to protecting workers and mitigating the spread of COVID-19 in the workplace. This guidance is in response to the Presidential Executive Order issued by President Joe Biden to address worker health and safety related to the Coronavirus and COVID-19.

"COVID-19 is a highly infectious disease that is spread most commonly through respiratory droplets and particles produced when an infected person exhales, talks, vocalizes, sneezes, or coughs. COVID-19 is highly transmissible and can be spread by people who have no symptoms. Particles containing the virus can travel more than 6 feet, especially indoors, and can be spread by individuals who do not know they are infected."

To answer this executive order, OSHA has reiterated that Face Coverings and Employer developed COVID-19 Prevention Programs are key in addressing the current pandemic facing the nation. The new guidance does include references to existing health and safety standards, https://www.osha.gov/coronavirus/standards, and how those regulations can provide guidance to employers.

As part of an Employer COVID-19 Prevention Plan, employers must include these key elements to be effective:

- Employers and Employees must conduct a proper Hazard Assessment in the workplace,
- Identify a combination of measures that can help limit the spread of COVID-19 in the workplace,
- Ensure that all policies and procedures developed related to coronavirus be communicated to both English and non-English speaking workers,
- Adopt measures that separate and send home those workers who are infected or potentially infected, and
- Ensure that protections are in place from retaliation against any worker raising COVID-19 concerns.

A key aspect for employers to recognize is that engaging workers and their representatives in program development is the most effective course of action and helps to ensure proper implementation of their COVID-19 Prevention Program. For an outline of a COVID-19 Prevention Program and to see the complete guidance from OSHA related to COVID-19, please visit https://www.osha.gov/coronavirus/safework.

According to OSHA, here is "What Workers Need to Know about COVID-19 Protections in the Workplace"

- "The best way to protect yourself is to stay far enough away from other people so that you are not breathing in particles produced by an infected person – generally at least 6 feet (about 2 arm lengths), although this is not a guarantee, especially in enclosed spaces or those with poor ventilation.
- Practice good personal hygiene and wash your hands often. Always cover your mouth and nose with a tissue when you cough or sneeze or use the inside of your elbow and do not spit. Monitor your health daily and be alert for COVID-19 symptoms (e.g., fever, cough, shortness of breath, or other symptoms of COVID-19).

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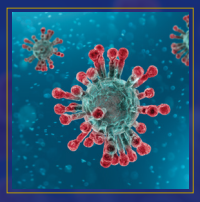

- Face coverings are simple barriers to help prevent your respiratory droplets or aerosols from reaching others. Not all face coverings are the same; the CDC recommends that face coverings be made of at least two layers of a tightly woven breathable fabric, such as cotton, and should not have exhalation valves or vents.
- The main function of wearing a face covering is to protect those around you, in case you are infected but not showing symptoms. Studies show that face coverings reduce the spray of droplets when worn over the nose and mouth.
- Although not their primary value, studies also show that face coverings can reduce wearers' risk of infection in certain circumstances, depending upon the face covering.
- You should wear a face covering even if you do not feel sick. This is because people with COVID-19 who never develop symptoms (asymptomatic) and those who are not yet showing symptoms (pre-symptomatic) can still spread the virus to other people.
- It is especially important to wear a face covering when you are unable to stay at least 6 feet apart from others since COVID-19 spreads mainly among people who are in close contact with one another. But wearing a face covering does not eliminate the need for physical distancing or other control measures (e.g., handwashing).
- It is important to wear a face covering and remain physically distant from co-workers and customers even if you have been vaccinated because it is not known at this time how vaccination affects transmissibility.
- Many employers have established COVID-19 prevention programs that include a number of important steps to keep workers safe – including steps from telework to flexible schedules to personal protective equipment (PPE) and face coverings. Ask your employer about plans in your workplace."

Another key component of the recommended OSHA COVID-19 Prevention Program is for an employer to assign a workplace coordinator who will be responsible for COVID-19 issues on the employer's behalf. Please visit the NECA Coronavirus Resource Center for additional resources such as the NECA Sample Exposure Control Plan, (ECP) in addition to the "NECA Risk Assessment Process and Checklist" form to assist in complying with the latest OSHA guidance.

References

Protecting Workers: Guidance on Mitigating and Preventing the Spread of COVID-19 in the Workplace
https://www.osha.gov/coronavirus/safework

US Department of Labor Issues Stronger Workplace Guidance on Coronavirus
https://www.dol.gov/newsroom/releases/osha/osha20210129

Coronavirus Regulations:
https://www.osha.gov/coronavirus/standards

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