On the Frontlines: Return to Work Series

The Role of COVID-19 Temperature Checks

An Option for COVID-19 Screening

Introduction

There's no one-size-fits-all COVID-19 screening and prevention strategy guaranteed to keep sick people away and only allow healthy ones in. An optimal strategy must be customized based on a thorough assessment of the historical, environmental and community factors that contribute to an organization's perceived level of risk. What we know is that some protocols are more effective than others in identifying symptomatic carriers of the disease.

Implementing daily health screenings that look at someone's health status, travel history and proximity to anyone who has tested positive for the coronavirus is a first step to gauge the risk factor for individuals. To add an additional layer of safety, temperature checks are often incorporated into the screening process, as fever is frequently a symptom of the coronavirus infection. The Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) recommends[1]: "Check temperatures of workers at the start of each shift to identify anyone with a fever of 100.4° F or greater (or reported feelings of feverishness), or if screening results indicate that the worker is suspected of having COVID-19."

For employers, the practice of checking employees' temperatures during the public health emergency is approved under the Equal Employment Opportunity Commission's Pandemic Preparedness in the Workplace and the Americans with Disabilities Act[2]. But do temperature checks really help? Or do they merely give a perception of safety and a psychological benefit to those who witness a tangible step taken to improve safety?

With the coronavirus presenting differently across the population, an ever-evolving list of symptoms and demographics of individuals testing positive, pre-symptomatic and asymptomatic cases, no vaccine yet available, and conflicting information circulating on the impact of temperature checks, businesses have a lot to consider when implementing temperature checks.

Temperature checks are an imperfect method of detecting infected employees

If an individual presents with a fever at the time of a temperature check, clearly it's a measure that will help prevent the spread of some sickness (even if the fever is not associated with the coronavirus, but rather another illness, like the flu). "Temperature checks offer a feasible method for identifying some infected people, but they're unlikely to catch every case."[3] If individuals have COVID-19 and are asymptomatic or pre-symptomatic (and therefore don't have a fever), a temperature check will not be impactful. Additionally, scientific evidence suggests that not every individual infected with COVID-19 will have a fever.[4]

Ultimately, people want to feel safe upon entering any type of facility or workplace. Seeing a temperature check take place as part of the screening process tends to lend peace of mind and comfort that actions are being taken to protect them. In addition, those who may misreport symptoms on daily health screenings or who don't realize they are positive could be intercepted at the temperature check. Stopping even one infected person is a successful step toward preventing an outbreak.

A variety of screening methods yields the greatest success in mitigating outbreaks

A multi-pronged approach deeply rooted in education that reinforces the importance of compliance—including proper training on the use of PPE, social distancing, hygiene (hand washing/sanitizing), and cleaning and disinfecting—helps maintain a safe environment.

These measures, in addition to health screenings—especially for those who are experiencing symptoms other than a fever—are critical in managing the risk of COVID-19.

Consider those who may have taken fever-reducing medication or are in the incubation period of the coronavirus and are not yet showing symptoms. It generally takes 2-14 days after exposure to the coronavirus for symptoms to appear.

If businesses decide not to use temperature checks as a screening measure, the daily health screening mentioned above should include a question that has individuals verify they feel well and are not experiencing any known symptoms associated with COVID-19. If they are feeling ill and presenting coronavirus symptoms, they need to avoid public places and get tested.

Temperature checks could serve as an important strategy in keeping businesses safe if screening plans are still in the beginning stages (e.g., when multilingual literature is not readily available), or for situations where people are particularly reluctant to share information about exposure or sickness.

Both asymptomatic and pre-symptomatic carriers can shed the virus

The CDC estimates that 40% of people infected with coronavirus never show symptoms[5] but are just as infectious as those with symptoms.

Asymptomatic and pre-symptomatic carriers add an additional layer to the challenge of detecting infected employees, as both groups feel and appear "normal." There is no definitive way to tell if an employee who contracts coronavirus is asymptomatic or pre-symptomatic, meaning temperature checks will not detect employees who fall into these categories.

Matrix has conducted over 30,000 COVID-19 tests and identified over 3,000 positive cases. But only 25% of the positives had any symptoms and the majority of those with symptoms did not have a high temperature.

The right tool for the job: There are several thermometers on the market to choose from

Once a company has decided to deploy temperature checks as a screening method, what's the best thermometer to use?

It ultimately depends on the business type and its needs. For example, oral digital thermometers are said to be the most accurate, but they're impractical for screening masses of employees and thwart the goal of social distancing. On the flip side, non-contact forehead infrared thermometers have poorer accuracy, while infrared thermal cameras used for mass screening show variable accuracy.

Businesses can reference FDA resources[6] and review any clinical literature available on the accuracy of a particular type of thermometer prior to purchasing.

Tailored plans are necessary to meet individual business needs

Matrix Medical Network is guiding numerous businesses across 37 states, helping them develop, execute and proactively evolve their return-to-work strategies. As new information and guidance is publicized and environmental/community factors continue to change, temperature checks are a factor in the screening process for many companies. Based on extensive experience and consultation to businesses in the industries of food manufacturing distribution, hospitality, entertainment, higher education and more, Matrix Medical Network offers insights for organizations to develop the most comprehensive return-to-work plan to safeguard their employees.

Matrix Medical Network is a leader in COVID-19 management

Matrix has developed an in-depth understanding of COVID-19 mitigation and the sound application of best practices to optimize employee safety and operational continuity. Matrix supports nearly 100 worksites across a variety of businesses and industries. Matrix has developed and refined best-in-class COVID-19 insight and specific expertise, making it a uniquely qualified partner to plan and commence a safe and healthy return to work.

We can help your business, too. Contact us about ways we can partner to maintain the health and safety of your workforce and the productivity of your operations: sales@matrixmedicalnetwork.com

Or learn more by exploring our Return to Work resources and Employee Health solutions.

[1] https://www.cdc.gov/coronavirus/2019-ncov/community/guidance-manufacturing-workers-employers.html
[2] https://www.eeoc.gov/laws/guidance/pandemic-preparedness-workplace-and-americans-disabilities-act
[3] https://www.businessinsider.com/temperature-checks-flawed-coronavirus-cases-asymptomatic-no-fever-2020-5
[4] https://www.hopkinsmedicine.org/health/conditions-and-diseases/coronavirus/coronavirus-symptoms-frequently-asked-questions
[5] https://www.cdc.gov/coronavirus/2019-ncov/hcp/planning-scenarios.html
[6] https://www.fda.gov/medical-devices/general-hospital-devices-and-supplies/non-contact-infrared-thermometers