

Making Workplaces COVID-19 Safe

Implementing Environmental Assessments and Safety Protocols for Outbreak Mitigation

Introduction

As the duration of COVID-19 in the US and around the world remains uncertain, what is understood is that businesses reopening offices and operations face unique challenges ensuring the safety of their workplaces and their employees.

Planning and preparation can seem overwhelming for organizations at first. Many businesses aren't accustomed to managing the many complexities (e.g., physical, psychological, logistical, legal, financial aspects) of mitigating infectious disease risks in their settings. While CDC and OSHA guidelines provide useful general information, they are often not specific enough for individual work environments looking to identify precise environmental changes and procedures needed.

Furthermore, employers who have developed a COVID-19 response blueprint on their own may wonder whether their plans meet the ever-evolving state and local health department guidelines.

Experienced outside expertise can help provide a clear and comprehensive picture of what problems and gaps exist. With a third-party, objective perspective, companies can better determine the behaviors, processes and education required to not only get their organizations return-to-work ready now, but to keep them safer going forward, accounting for future risks such as influenza alongside COVID-19.



A holistic approach that extends beyond testing alone is needed for COVID-19 mitigation and sustainable safe practices in the workplace.

Drawing from its industry-leading base of experience and real-world learnings in COVID-19 workplace preparedness, Matrix Medical Network has identified key actions organizations should consider as part of a comprehensive risk mitigation strategy.

Initial and ongoing workplace evaluations

Environmental assessments are both an initial step and continuous component of a business safety plan that helps organizations prepare for and respond to the coronavirus. These efforts help protect employees by identifying, deploying and monitoring actions to limit the spread of COVID-19, and provide additional assurance to employees needed to maintain business operations.

A qualified workplace coordinator and team should be identified to be responsible for COVID-19 assessment and control planning, and all employees should know how to contact the coordinator with any related concerns.¹

Steps appropriate to protect employees will vary based on the type of work being performed and exposure risk, including potential for interaction with infected people (suspected or confirmed) and contamination of the work environment. Level of risk in the work environment varies by activity, considering whether there is significant public interaction, physical contact required, large confined spaces, professional working spaces, isolated areas or solo functions. Variables to look at are the proximity of exposure (how closely and how long people interact with each other in person) and the extent of exposure (how many other people an individual tends to encounter in a typical workday).²

With these understandings, it is also helpful to enlist industrial hygiene, engineering and infection control professionals. These individuals understand how to carefully evaluate both the community and workplace to tailor the most effective strategies relevant to each specific industry.

Recommended procedures include the use of appropriate engineering and administrative controls, safe work practices and personal protective equipment (PPE) to prevent worker exposures.³

Initial workplace assessment involves thorough evaluation and reorganization of the site with focus on when to bring employees back and how many at a time. The assessment should also address the establishment of health and safety measures (e.g., screening process, use of masks/hand sanitizer, cleaning/disinfecting), office reconfiguration for adequate distancing, development of visitor policies, physical movement throughout the building, and checking air quality/flow and water systems.

Once procedures are determined and put in place, it is critical that ongoing assessments be conducted periodically to evaluate what is working and where improvements need to be made.

Workplace coordinators should routinely connect with public health officials and occupational safety and health professionals to make sure they are receiving the most up-to-date information. As part of these assessments, organizations also need to consider the appropriate role for testing and contact tracing (identifying person-to-person spread) of COVID-19-positive workers.¹

The most common and overlooked risks

The apprehension around COVID-19 is very real and managing that apprehension is a crucial part of implementing COVID-19 strategies. Employees are rightfully concerned about their health and the health of their families and friends. Businesses are concerned about the viability of operations and ensuring they are doing everything they can to manage risk. Scientists and health professionals continue to learn more about the virus, which then leads to new best practices around the risk calculus and safety requirements. Therefore, it is imperative for organizations to be dynamic and proactive as a standard operating model—to handle uncertainty through real-time microdata monitoring and iteratively testing operating plans.

Culture is an important part of the solution, as strict enforcement of policies and greater employee compliance yields better control of cases and hotspots. However, individual behavior change is difficult. Companies with diverse workforces need to understand language barriers, cultural group beliefs and common misinformation about the coronavirus. Organizations must encourage and support people to think about and do things differently by demystifying the issue and promoting a “we’re in this together” mentality. Tapping respected colleagues to champion and demonstrate safety compliance efforts and bringing in COVID-19 experts adds a level of credibility, reinforces messages and best practices, and helps foster employee peace of mind and trust.

Mitigating health risks also involves more than just those protocols that apply while employees are on site. Companies can help mitigate risks that employees face outside of the physical work environment. A comprehensive set of protocols can address pre-entry (education and training), travel to and from work locations (considering public transportation and carpooling), use of common spaces (such as bathrooms and break rooms and the frequency of cleaning/disinfecting) and the post-infection period (after an employee is found to have the virus).²

Upon monitoring for infections, outbreaks and changes in business performance, new organizational structures may be required, such as a “nerve center” responsible for collecting and consolidating data, anticipating changes, coordinating responses to new conditions and tackling immediate concerns while planning ahead for longer-term shifts.²

What companies are doing to improve workplace safety

Challenged by concern of new COVID-19 cases and outbreaks, organizations are finding it helpful to borrow from approaches taken by essential businesses, like healthcare facilities, pharmacies, grocery stores and banks that have been operating from the start of the pandemic and have stayed open.

Successful organizations have established and promoted effective behaviors that help prevent the spread of COVID-19,⁴ such as teaching and reinforcing hand hygiene, respiratory etiquette and the use of cloth face coverings to protect others, as well as ensuring that adequate supplies (e.g., soap, hand sanitizer, paper towels) are easily available. Other efforts consist of preparation to isolate and safely transport those who are sick to their home or a healthcare facility, and educating people to stay home when sick or when they have been in contact with someone with COVID-19 and to follow CDC guidance for proper care. Communication methods range from posting signs and posters to sharing informational emails and videos to required training before being allowed on site.

Common environmental changes also make a significant impact. Actions like modifying seating, workstations and workflow, creating signage or floor stickers to direct hallway traffic, and using sneeze guards and/or barriers to separate workers from each other and customers help ensure adequate social distancing. Additional protective measures include propping open frequently used doors, closing or limiting use of common areas, and scheduling frequent cleaning and disinfecting routines (as well as closing off areas used by someone who is sick and waiting 24 hours before cleaning and disinfecting).

To maintain healthy operations,⁴ these practices have proven to contribute to safer outcomes:

- Continuous awareness of local or state regulations
- Daily health checks, including temperature screening or symptom checking
- Protecting people at higher risk for severe illness
- Limiting the number of people in the office at one time
- Staggering start times, rotating schedules and/or offering flexible hours
- Allowing employees to continue to work from home
- Conducting telework and virtual meetings
- Creating static groups or “cohorts” of individuals to avoid mixing between groups
- Pursuing virtual events and maintaining social distancing at any in-person events, limiting group size when possible
- Limiting non-essential visitors, volunteers and activities involving external groups
- Implementing flexible and non-punitive leave policies
- Monitoring absenteeism and creating a backup staffing plan
- Providing options for non-essential travel in accordance with state and local regulations
- Establishing communication systems: for employees to self-report COVID-19 symptoms, a positive test for COVID-19 or exposure to someone with COVID-19; to notify local health authorities of COVID-19 cases; to notify employees (customers, students, etc.) of any COVID-19 exposures while maintaining confidentiality in accordance with privacy laws; to notify of any facility closures

Workplace safety is an ongoing commitment

As workplaces look to operate in a volatile COVID-19 world, environmental assessments and safety protocol checks must be treated as an ongoing priority. Data updates show the virus is changing rapidly, and as it ebbs and flows, companies are going to have to shift, recalibrate and quickly apply different capabilities and procedures to make themselves safer.

Even with the latest knowledge and evolving practices, sustainability will be a persistent challenge. Partnership with dedicated COVID-19 response experts—who understand the unique factors of each business and what aid is readily available in the community—can assist with customized strategy development that is adaptable, applicable and enduring for whatever the next operating normal will be.

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/organizations/meat-poultry-processing-workers-employers.html>

² <https://www.mckinsey.com/about-us/covid-response-center/leadership-mindsets/webinars/returning-to-the-workplace-lessons-from-essential-businesses?sid=d4a13fda-9fce-4eb2-ab17-95d572652bbd#>

³ <https://www.osha.gov/SLTC/covid-19/controlprevention.html>

⁴ <https://www.cdc.gov/coronavirus/2019-ncov/community/community-mitigation.html#table3>