

Navigating Occupational Health and Safety Regulations During Public Health Emergencies

COVID-19 requires sustainable and continuous implementation of controls to prevent its spread. The implementation of safety protocols not only reduces community transmission, but is it also legally required to protect workers on-the-job. However, many workplaces are not prepared to design and implement prevention and control measures needed to protect workers as they do not have staff with specialization or training in occupational health and safety. This checklist presents some basic components of occupational health and safety regulations that are important to consider in light of COVID-19. These reminders are important for employers, in general and for health departments to ensure that personnel are protected while on-the-job, as well as for staff advising businesses and other workplaces on safety protocols during COVID-19.

What do we need to consider to ensure the implementation of adequate health and safety protocols?

Employers are required to provide each worker “a place of employment that is free from recognized hazards that are causing or may cause death or serious physical injury.” When we consider the COVID-19 prevention protocols we must observe the following requirements:

- There must be a written protocol that addresses the control and prevention of COVID-19 infections.
- The written protocol is always available and accessible to employees.
- The protocol is disclosed and discussed with all employees, including temporary employees.



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- In the case of temporary employees, there is an agreement between temporary employment companies and the employer that supervises to ensure the worker fully understand the safety protocol.
- There is a record that employees have been trained regarding the protocol and requirements necessary to comply with the protocol.

Do we know the risks of carrying out our work?

Each workplace is unique--control and mitigation strategies must be adapted to fit each workplace and each worker population, accordingly. Here are the steps that must be followed to ensure an adequate risk assessment and mitigation.

- Make a list of tasks by workspace/area.
- Analyze risks based on the following OSHA-provided exposure hazard scales:
 - **Low risk**- Jobs that do not require close contact (within 6 feet for a total of 15 minutes or more over a 24-hour period) with other people.
 - **Moderate risk**- Jobs that require frequent close contact (within 6 feet for a total of 15 minutes or more over a 24-hour period) or sustained close contact with others in areas with community transmission.
 - **High risk**- Jobs with a high potential for exposure to known or suspected sources of SARS-CoV-2.
 - **Very high risk**- Work with a very high potential for exposure to known or suspected sources of SARS-CoV-2 during specific medical, post-mortem or laboratory procedures.
- Identify measures to address each risk on the list considering the hierarchy of controls:
 - **Engineering controls**: Physical barriers and modifications in ventilation such as increasing the amount of external air supplied or general or individual filtration mechanisms.
 - **Administrative controls**: Physical distancing, staggered schedules, decreased percentage of occupancy, cleaning and disinfection, remote work, or other ways of doing work that reduce the time and frequency of exposure.



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- **Personal Protection:** Disposable or cloth face masks and personal protective equipment such as N95 respirators or equivalent.

- Communicate to employees the risks and controls to be implemented.

How We Can Safely Handle Disinfectants?

Cleaning and disinfection processes must be constantly monitored. The use of these chemicals may be subject to the Hazard Communication Standard. Although most cleaning products are commercially available, using them more frequently may increase the risk of the task. Here are some of the minimum requirements to meet this chemical safety requirements and other CDC recommendations.

- Make sure the disinfectant is on the Environmental Protection Agency's List N.
- Generate a list of disinfectants that will be used.
- Keep the Safety Data Sheets (SDS) of the disinfectants used always available.
- Make sure all disinfectants, including those in secondary containers, are properly labeled. The label must contain:
 - Chemical name
 - Hazard and risk information
 - Hazardous active ingredients
- Train employees about how to safely use and dispose of the disinfectant before any application of the chemical.
- Check that disinfectants are used as directed by the manufacturer, making sure:
 - The appropriate dilution is used.
 - The indicated contact time is expected.
- Provide personal protective equipment as indicated in the safety sheet and ensure that it is used accordingly.



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How we protect ourselves individually?

Personal protective equipment supports risk reduction. Depending on the industry and other controls in place, personal protection may be used to prevent contagion or to protect other risks associated with the job. All personal protective equipment is subject to OSHA's personal protective equipment standard. Here are some of the key elements of this standard.

- For most required personal protective equipment, it is the employer's responsibility to pay for it and to ensure that the employee has access to it.
- Train employees in the use, storage, and disposal of equipment (if apply).

Certain personal protective equipment has specific regulations including:

- Eye and face protection (29 CFR 1910.133).
- Hand protection (29 CFR 1910.138).
- Respiratory protection (29 CFR 1910.134).

During the COVID-19 Pandemic, we have observed the use of respirators as a mechanism to protect workers. Other equipment, with the intention of preventing person-to-person or airborne transmission, have been used. It is important that, if the risk assessment identifies that respiratory protection is necessary, the employer provides the appropriate equipment. Outlined below are the latest OSHA requirements for respirator use.

- NIOSH Certified Respirators (Example: N95)
 - Medical evaluation of employee
 - Fit test
 - Daily leak test by employee
 - Training and procedures for correct use, storage, inspection, and disposal (if applicable).
 - Guidance in case of voluntary use
- Respirators certified under criteria of other jurisdictions (Example: KN95)



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- Training and procedures for correct use, storage, inspection, and disposal (if applicable).
- Daily leak test by employee
- Guidance on voluntary use

It is important to note that masks (procedural, surgical, disposable, or medical) are not considered personal protective equipment and are not currently subject to this standard. However, some jurisdictions have issued emergency standards or executive orders that require the employer to provide them. To this end employers must carry out the following recommendations:

- Provide cloth, surgical, or disposable masks to employees.
- Guide employees in the use (over mouth and nose) of masks and ensure that they are always used.
- Guide employees in identifying appropriate size masks, no modifications or damage.
- Guide employees in handling and cleaning reusable masks.
- In the case of disposable masks, be sure to provide a mask for each day and promote the disposal of masks once the workday is over.
- Do not allow the use of masks with valves.
- In the case of reusable masks, make sure they have 3 layers of fabric, as recommended by the CDC.

Training and Adequate Communication

- For efficient and sustainable implementation of contagion prevention and control measures, it is essential that each employee knows and understands them.
- Complete the trainings before starting the tasks that could expose them to the identified hazards.



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- Set aside space to refresh the training periodically, especially if a mistake or near-misses occur in the implementation of these procedures or a COVID-19 case is identified in the workplace.
- Conduct trainings in the employee's language.
- Make sure the terms used in training, materials and resources are culturally competent.
- Always keep resources, materials, and training accessible to employee.



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