



# SAFER

## Preventing the Spread of Respiratory Infections in the Workplace

Respiratory infections are major public health concerns impacting the overall wellbeing of your workforce and can affect productivity in the workplace. By implementing preventive measures, employers can ensure their workers' health and safety and reduce the impact of illnesses on business operations. With the continuing presence of **COVID-19** infection combined with the threat of **influenza, RSV<sup>1</sup>** and other respiratory illnesses, maintaining safe and healthy air in the workplace is an effective and important way of reducing the risk of airborne infectious disease transmission.

Employers can take a range of approaches to prevent the spread of respiratory infections in the workplace. The hierarchy of controls can be utilized to implement strategies in a prioritized manner. For example, the most effective measure is to eliminate the hazard by encouraging sick workers to stay home. In the presence of pathogens and other respiratory hazards, the next priority is keeping the air as clean as possible. Employers can further reduce the spread by encouraging personal protective measures such as vaccination, masking, hygiene and other precautions as appropriate.

Here are steps employers can take to minimize the risk of respiratory infections in the workplace:

---

<sup>1</sup> Respiratory Syncytial Virus (RSV) typically causes mild cold-like symptoms but can lead to severe infection and even require hospitalization. RSV poses the greatest risk to young children and older adults.

## 1. Support sick workers in staying home

- Develop policies encouraging workers to stay home when sick without fear of reprisals. Provide flexible sick leave policies and communicate the importance of not coming to work while contagious.
- Send workers home immediately if they develop symptoms at work.

## 2. Reduce in-person interaction

- Identify tasks or processes that can be removed from the workplace to eliminate the risk of exposure. For example, host virtual meetings to reduce face-to-face interactions.
- Implement flexible work schedules or remote work options to reduce the number of workers present in the workplace at the same time.

## 3. Evaluate and improve workplace air quality

- Determine the most effective combination of actions as they will vary by building design, location and more. Resources such as the [Clean Air in Buildings Challenge](#) from the Environmental Protection Agency can help determine the most effective layered approach to improve your indoor air quality.
- Take extra steps to improve ventilation during [cold weather](#).
- Follow updated guidelines from the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention that state occupied buildings should undergo at least [five clean air changes an hour](#), which can be achieved through any combination of central ventilation systems, natural ventilation or additional devices such as filtration systems. Air changes per hour, strategies and cost considerations can be found on the [CDC Ventilation in Buildings](#) guidance webpage.

## 4. Encourage health and hygiene practices

- Provide sufficient handwashing stations stocked with soap and running water. Hand sanitizers should be readily available, especially in areas where handwashing facilities are not convenient.
- Promote respiratory etiquette. Make tissues available and encourage individuals to cover their mouth and nose with a tissue or elbow when coughing or sneezing.

## 5. Ensure regular cleaning and disinfection

- Clean and disinfect frequently touched objects and surfaces like doorknobs, keyboards, phones and desks. Use products that meet the [Environmental Protection Agency's criteria](#) for use against the specific pathogens causing respiratory infections.
- Provide disposable wipes if surface contamination is likely so commonly used surfaces can be wiped down before use.

## 6. Accommodate workers' health needs and personal comfort levels

- Allow options for remote work or modified duties when necessary for workers to accommodate their own health needs and personal risk tolerance.

- Reduce stigma for workers who may prefer to use face coverings by providing them at entrances or posting signs supporting the use of face coverings.
- 7. Consider offering personal respiratory protection**
    - Think about providing respirators for those who request them, even if respiratory protective equipment is not required in your workplace. While tightly fitted face coverings offer some protection against airborne pathogens, respirators such as the N95 are more effective. **Providing respirators for voluntary use** in non-hazardous work environments does not violate any OSHA requirements and does not require that the wearer be fit-tested.
  - 8. Promote vaccination**
    - Encourage and enable vaccination. Depending on the nature of the respiratory infections common in your area, promote relevant vaccinations.
  - 9. Communicate regularly**
    - Share updates, reminders and changes in policy to ensure workers are informed as regular communication helps keep the focus on prevention.

In conclusion, there isn't a single, universal solution to prevent the spread of respiratory infections. It's essential to abide by local health authorities' recommendations and to adapt and respond to the situation as it develops. This involves fostering a culture of safety, timely communication and flexibility in your workplace response.

### Additional Resources:

Respiratory illness activity by state and county: <https://www.cdc.gov/respiratory-viruses/index.html>

#### Vaccination

Communication resources in English and Spanish:  
<https://www.cdc.gov/vaccines/communication-resources.html>

Locate vaccination locations: <https://www.vaccines.gov/>

#### COVID-19 Testing

Order free at-home COVID-19 tests: <https://www.covid.gov/tests>

Check if expiration dates have been extended on tests you already have:  
<https://www.fda.gov/medical-devices/coronavirus-covid-19-and-medical-devices/home-otc-covid-19-diagnostic-tests#list>