Handling COVID-19 Cases in the Workplace: What Employers Need to Know

Employers can play an important role in helping New York City (NYC) prevent the spread of COVID-19 by quickly addressing cases of COVID-19 in the workplaces. This guide provides answers to questions about screening and how to handle confirmed or possible cases of COVID-19 in your workplace. This document is not intended for health care facilities or congregate residential facilities.

Please refer to New York State (NYS) COVID-19 Requirements and the NYC Department of Health and Mental Hygiene’s (NYC Health Department) Reopening New York City: Frequently Asked Questions (FAQs) for additional information on COVID-19 safety precautions in the workplace.

For information, guidance and resources on COVID-19, visit nyc.gov/health/coronavirus.

Are employers required to test their employees for COVID-19?
No. Decisions on whether to recommend or require employee testing are at the discretion of employers. For more information, see Information for Employers on NYC’s COVID-19 Testing Recommendations.

How should I conduct daily health screenings?
Employees must be screened for COVID-19 daily before entering the workplace. Screening should be done remotely if possible. Here are some ideas for how to conduct health screenings:

- Call employees before they leave home to ask the screening questions.
- Set up an automated phone line that allows employees to indicate “yes” or “no,” and monitor the line to ensure compliance.
- Issue an auto-generated email or survey that enables a response.
- If screening from home is not feasible, designate a screening area and distribute the screening questions on paper to employees and any others who enter the workplace.

Ask staff members to let you know as soon as possible if they test positive for COVID-19 or have COVID-19 symptoms. This is especially important for staff who do not take the health screening on a daily basis, such as staff who have a hybrid work schedule (in-person and telework). Provide staff with instructions about how to report symptoms or a positive test result, including information about who they can contact on weekends or other nonwork hours.

Instructions on what to do, including not coming to work that day and when they can return to work, should be provided to staff members who answer “yes” to any of the screening questions. Be sure to review screening responses and document that the screening was conducted each day.
What safety protocols are required if screening is conducted on-site at the workplace?

- Maintain physical distance.
  - People awaiting screening must maintain at least 6 feet of distance from others.
  - Incorporate physical distancing (maintaining at least 6 feet between screeners and others) or physical barriers to minimize exposure between the screeners and people being screened during the screening.
  - Staff should maintain 6 feet of distance from each other.
- Screeners and people being screened must wear a face covering if they can medically tolerate one. If the person being screened cannot medically tolerate a face covering, consider a reasonable accommodation, such as having the person complete a written screening survey rather than an in-person screening.

How will employers know that a staff member has COVID-19?
You may learn directly from the staff member or be contacted by the NYC Health Department.

What steps should employers take when they learn a staff member has COVID-19?

- Confirm the staff member had a diagnostic test for the virus and not an antibody test (see COVID-19 Testing: Frequently Asked Questions (FAQs) for more information).
- Determine whether the staff members was at your workplace during their infectious period (defined below), potentially exposing others to COVID-19. Make sure they understand how to isolate safely at home and when they may return to work (see What to Do If You Have COVID-19 and COVID-19: Understanding Quarantine and Isolation). We also recommend you provide information about how to access resources and receive paid leave, if eligible (see Appendix).
- If the staff member was at the workplace during their infectious period, identify everyone who was a close contact (defined below) of the staff member during their infectious period.
- Exclude all close contacts from the workplace (unless they meet an exception to quarantine, as described below) and inform them that, per the NYS Department of Health (NYSDOH) requirements, they must stay home and separate from others (including household members) for 10 days from the date of their last exposure. They should continue to monitor themselves for fever or other COVID-19 symptoms for four days after quarantine has ended. If symptoms occur, they should isolate themselves, contact their health care provider and get tested for COVID-19. For additional information on quarantine, including how to safely separate from others, see COVID-19: Understanding Quarantine and Isolation.
- Submit information on contacts so they can be enrolled in the NYC Test & Trace Corps program (see Appendix).
- If you are a business or other entity required to follow NYS reopening guidelines, report the new COVID-19 case to the NYC Health Department by calling 866-692-3641. If the NYC Health Department determines that additional follow-up is needed, you will be contacted with instructions.
Are there any exceptions to quarantine?
The following people do not need to quarantine and can attend work, as long as they have no symptoms of COVID-19:

- Anyone who is fully vaccinated against COVID-19. Fully vaccinated means it has been at least two weeks after they received their second dose of a two-dose vaccine (such as the Pfizer-BioNTech or Moderna vaccines) or two weeks after they received their single-dose vaccine (such as the Johnson & Johnson/Janssen vaccine).
- Anyone who has had laboratory-confirmed COVID-19 in the past three months and recovered. Three months is measured from the date a person first had COVID-19 symptoms or, if they had no symptoms, the date of their first positive diagnostic test.

In addition, an essential worker who the employer has deemed essential and critical for the operation or safety of the workplace, upon a documented determination by their supervisor and a human resources representative in consultation with appropriate state and local health authorities, can attend work during quarantine if all the following are met:

- Extra precautions are taken while at work (such as wearing a face covering at all times, even if physical distance can be maintained)
- They quarantine when not at work
- They monitor themselves for a full 14 days

See the NYSDOH’s Interim Guidance for Public and Private Employees Returning to Work Following COVID-19 Infection or Exposure for additional information.

What is the infectious period of a person with COVID-19?
The infectious period is when someone with COVID-19 may potentially spread the virus to others (or when they are contagious):

- The start date of the infectious period is two days before the person had their first symptom or two days before their COVID-19 test date if they never have symptoms.
- The end date of the infectious period is 10 days after the person had their first symptom or 10 days after their COVID-19 test date if they never have symptoms.

The test date is when the test took place, not when the test results were reported to the provider or patient.

What is a close contact?
A close contact is someone who has been within 6 feet for at least 10 minutes over a 24-hour period of someone who has COVID-19 during their infectious period, regardless of face covering use or the presence of plexiglass or other barriers.

Additionally, other people may be considered close contacts in certain situations, including:

- When physical distancing cannot be consistently monitored or maintained
- When people are participating in activities that require releasing more air, such as vigorous exercise, singing or playing wind or brass instruments in an enclosed space
If you have questions about who is a close contact, call the NYC Health Department at 866-692-3641, selecting prompts for facility reporting and ask to speak to a medical epidemiologist. Consultation is available from 9 a.m. to 5 p.m. daily.

**When can a staff member return to work if they have COVID-19?**

Any person confirmed with COVID-19 must stay home (isolate) until all the following are true:

- At least 10 days have passed since their symptoms started
- They have not had a fever for the last 24 hours without the use of fever-reducing medication
- Their overall illness has improved

If the person never had symptoms, they should stay home for 10 days from the date they were tested.

**When can a staff member return to work if they had symptoms of COVID-19?**

Anyone with symptoms of COVID-19, including a fever of 100.0 degrees Fahrenheit or greater, cough, loss of taste or smell, or shortness of breath that began within the past 10 days, cannot go to work even if their provider says that they have something other than COVID-19 (such as allergies, strep throat or flu) until:

- It has been at least 10 days since their symptoms started and they have not had a fever for the last 24 hours without the use of fever-reducing medication and their overall illness has improved
- Or they are not yet confirmed to have COVID-19, test negative by a molecular diagnostic test and have not had a fever in the past 24 hours without use of fever-reducing medication
  - The negative diagnostic test must be a molecular test (such as a PCR [polymerase chain reaction] test). An antigen diagnostic test or antibody test is not acceptable for this purpose. People should ask their provider before they get tested to make sure they are getting the right type of test. When someone seeks to return to work after having symptoms but before the end of their isolation period, you should verify their negative test result was from a molecular diagnostic test. For more information about COVID-19 testing, see COVID-19 Testing: Frequently Asked Questions (FAQs).

For people who have symptoms that begin less than three days after receiving a COVID-19 vaccine:

- If symptoms include cough, shortness of breath, runny nose, sore throat, loss of taste or smell, fever, nausea, vomiting or diarrhea, manage as potential COVID-19 infection (exclude them from work).
- If the only symptoms are fatigue, headache, chills, or muscle or joint pain, people may return to work if symptoms resolve within two days. If symptoms persist beyond this time frame, manage as potential COVID-19 infection (exclude them from work).
If you have questions about a specific situation not addressed by the guidance in this section, you can call the NYC Health Department at 866-692-3641 from 9 a.m. to 5 p.m. daily for a consultation with an epidemiologist.

**Does a staff member who had COVID-19, symptoms of COVID-19 or was required to quarantine need a doctor’s note or COVID-19 testing to return to work?**

No. If they have completed isolation or quarantine, they do not need any documentation to return to work. They do not need a doctor’s note, note from the NYC Health Department or negative laboratory test result. It is strongly recommended **not** to require negative COVID-19 test results after isolation, as a person may test positive for COVID-19 for many weeks or months after infection even though they are no longer contagious.

**A person in my workplace was identified as a close contact of someone with COVID-19. Can they return to work before the end of their quarantine period if they test negative for COVID-19?**

No. The person must stay home for 10 days. After the 10-day quarantine period ends, and particularly for the first four days after it ends, people should continue to monitor for symptoms and strictly follow COVID-19 precautions, such as wearing a face covering, and practicing physical distancing and good hand hygiene, because a person remains at risk for developing COVID-19 for up to 14 days after being exposed to the virus.

**If a person has symptoms of COVID-19 but has not had a test yet (or test results are unknown), do close contacts of that person need to be identified and told to quarantine?**

If the person with symptoms has a known exposure to someone with COVID-19, their close contacts should be excluded and told to quarantine. If there was no known exposure, contact the NYC Health Department at 866-692-3641 for a consultation with an epidemiologist, as a case-by-case assessment is required. Consultation is available from 9 a.m. to 5 p.m. daily.

**Do the contacts of someone in quarantine also need to quarantine?**

Generally, no. Contacts of someone in quarantine do not need to stay home unless the quarantined person develops symptoms of COVID-19 or tests positive for COVID-19.

**If someone has been vaccinated against COVID-19, do they still need to quarantine if they are identified as a contact?**

No. People who are fully vaccinated do not need to quarantine following an exposure. However, if they develop symptoms of COVID-19, they must stay home (isolate) and should get tested.

**Do staff members need to quarantine and be excluded from work following travel?**

Quarantine is not required following domestic or international travel. Some workers, such as health care workers, have stricter rules for returning to work after travel. For more information about travel quarantine, visit the [NYS Travel Advisory website](https://www.health.ny.gov/environmental/air/travel_advisory.cfm).
Can a staff member who has been tested for COVID-19 attend work while waiting for their test result?
If a staff member has had symptoms of COVID-19 within the last 10 days, they must stay home while they wait for their test results. They can return to work only when the criteria described above are met.

If a staff member has not had COVID-19 symptoms and was not recently exposed to someone with COVID-19, they may attend work while waiting for their test results.

Can I share information about the person with COVID-19 with my other staff?
No. You should not reveal the identity of the person with COVID-19 (other than to the NYC Health Department staff assisting in the investigation) or share information about the person that could identify them, including where they worked or any information about the symptoms they may have had. That information is confidential. Maintaining confidentiality will help encourage other people to disclose when they have COVID-19.

Do I need to do any special cleaning or disinfection in areas used by people with COVID-19?
Close off areas used by people confirmed with COVID-19 who were in the workplace during their infectious period. See COVID-19: General Guidance for Cleaning and Disinfection for Non-Health Care Setting as well as the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention’s guidelines on Cleaning and Disinfecting Your Facility.

What if someone in my workplace has had a COVID-19 antibody test?
A positive or negative antibody test result should not be used to make any decisions about whether someone can attend work. Antibody tests for COVID-19 cannot be used to detect whether someone is currently sick or infected or whether someone is immune to the virus.

Where can people get tested for COVID-19?
People can find a testing site at nyc.gov/covidtest. Many sites have no-cost testing, regardless of immigration or insurance status. Direct your staff to COVID-19 Testing: Frequently Asked Questions (FAQs) for information about COVID-19 testing, and remind them to let you know right away if they receive a positive diagnostic test result.
Appendix: Identifying Close Contacts and Submitting Information to the NYC Test & Trace Corps

Checklist:

- Confirm the case was on-site during their infectious period.
- Identify the people who had close contact with the case during their infectious period (see the example below).
- Notify the close contacts who have to quarantine.
- Submit information on close contact information to the NYC Health Department.

Example:
An employee came to work on April 20 and worked from home the other days. They first experienced symptoms on April 21. This means, the start of their infectious period is April 19 (two days before their symptoms started) and the end of their infectious period is May 1 (10 days after their symptoms started.)

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<tr>
<td>Start of infectious period</td>
<td>Employee came to work</td>
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The employee reported that two coworkers came to their workstation on April 20 for 15 minutes to discuss a project plan. They were all wearing face coverings but were only three feet apart.

You should now complete the last two items in the checklist.

- Notify close contacts of their exposure without disclosing the identity of the employee who has COVID-19 or other identified contacts.
  - Close contacts who fall into one of the quarantine exception categories (fully vaccinated or having had COVID-19 in the last three months, as described in the FAQ section above) do not need to quarantine and can come to work.
- Inform close contacts who do not fall into one of the exception categories that they need to quarantine for 10 days after the date they last had contact with the employee who has COVID-19. See the sample script below for information you should give when communicating with close contacts.
- Submit a list of close contacts to the NYC Test & Trace Corps using the COVID-19 Facility Exposures form.
  - The contact list for the employee who has COVID-19 should include both coworkers’ first and last names, phone numbers, and date of last contact with the employee. Dates of birth and addresses may be helpful but not necessary to include.
You do not need to include employees that fall into one of the exception categories (fully vaccinated or having had COVID-19 in the last three months). You should still submit information for essential workers who are deemed critical to operations and who will continue to work during their quarantine period.

If you have trouble submitting the contact list using the COVID-19 Facility Exposure form, call 866-692-3641.

Sample script/communication for informing close contacts of their potential exposure:
We are reaching out to notify you that you may have been exposed to someone with COVID-19 on [date]. According to the NYC Health Department, you should complete 10 days of quarantine starting from the date you may have been exposed. Quarantine includes staying home and separating from others in the household, except if you need to seek medical care.

You should also monitor yourself for COVID-19 symptoms for 14 days after the date you may have been exposed, including taking your temperature at least once a day and getting tested if you develop any symptoms. Common COVID-19 symptoms include fever, cough, difficulty breathing and loss of taste or smell. For a full list of symptoms, visit nyc.gov/health/coronavirus and go to the Symptoms and Care web page. You may want to get tested even if you do not have symptoms. To find a COVID-19 testing site, visit nyc.gov/covidtest. Many sites offer testing at no cost.

If you need a hotel so you can separate from others in your household and get support while quarantining, go to nychealthandhospitals.org/test-and-trace/take-care/. You can also call 212-COVID19 (212-268-4319) to receive help on how to access resources, including free hotel accommodations while isolating, food resources, and paid sick leave for yourself or caring for a child who needs to isolate or quarantine.

For additional information about COVID-19, visit nyc.gov/health/coronavirus. If you have questions, call 311.

Resources
We recommend you share the below resources with employees, by email or otherwise:

- What New Yorkers Need to Know About COVID-19
- COVID-19 Testing: Frequently Asked Questions (FAQs)
- COVID-19: Understanding Quarantine and Isolation
- What to Do If You Have COVID-19
- COVID-19 Resource Guide for New York City

The NYC Health Department may change recommendations as the situation evolves. 4.29.21