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

Employers can play an important role in helping prevent the spread of COVID-19 by quickly addressing cases of COVID-19 in the workplace. This guide provides answers to questions about how to handle confirmed or possible cases of COVID-19 in the workplace.

Note: This document is not intended for schools, health care facilities or congregate residential facilities, which may have different quarantine, isolation and exclusion requirements.

- To see whether your industry has specific requirements from New York State (NYS), visit [forward.ny.gov/active-industry-guidance](http://forward.ny.gov/active-industry-guidance).
- For information on quarantine and isolation, visit [on.nyc.gov/quarantine-isolation](http://on.nyc.gov/quarantine-isolation).
- For information on COVID-19 testing, visit [nyc.gov/health/testingtips](http://nyc.gov/health/testingtips).
- For information on what to do if you have COVID-19, visit [on.nyc.gov/covid-symptoms](http://on.nyc.gov/covid-symptoms).
- For additional information, guidance and resources on COVID-19, visit [nyc.gov/health/coronavirus](http://nyc.gov/health/coronavirus).

For questions or consultation, call the New York City Department of Health and Mental Hygiene (NYC Health Department) at 866-692-3641, Monday through Friday, from 9 a.m. to 5 p.m., and ask to speak to an epidemiologist.

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 tested positive for COVID-19 or has symptoms of COVID-19?

1. Determine who needs to isolate and be excluded from work. The following people need to isolate, regardless of their vaccination status:
   - People who have a positive viral test (antigen or molecular/PCR) for COVID-19, whether or not they have symptoms.
   - People with symptoms of COVID-19, including people who are awaiting test results or have not been tested. People with symptoms should isolate even if they do not know if they have been in close contact to someone with COVID-19.

2. Inform the staff member to isolate for at least five days, where Day 1 is the day after symptoms begin or, if asymptomatic, the day after their test date.
   - Isolation ends after five days if they are fever-free for 24 hours without the use of fever-reducing medication and other symptoms have improved. The individual should wear a well-fitting mask while around others for an additional five days.
   - People who are unable to wear a well-fitting mask for five days should isolate for 10 days.
We also recommend providing staff with information about how to access resources and receive paid leave, if eligible.

- For resources to help isolate at home or a free hotel room, call 212-COVID19 (212-268-4319) or visit nychealthandhospitals.org/take-care.
- For a list of other resources, such as support for food, employment, health insurance, housing and more, visit nyc.gov/coronavirus and select the For NYers tab at the top of the page.
- For information on paid sick leave during quarantine or isolation, visit nyc.gov/health/covidtreatments and paidfamilyleave.ny.gov/covid19.

3. If the staff member tests positive for COVID-19, determine whether they may have exposed others in the workplace and identify close contacts.

Who is considered a close contact and how long should they be excluded from work?
Close contacts are people who have been within 6 feet of someone who has COVID-19, for a total of 15 minutes or more over a 24-hour period. This is from two days before the person with COVID-19’s symptoms began (or if they have no symptoms, two days before their test date).

Close contacts should be excluded from work as follows, where Day 1 is the day after their last close contact to the person with COVID-19:

- If up to date on their COVID-19 vaccines (fully vaccinated and have received additional doses and booster shots when eligible) or had COVID-19 within the last 90 days (as confirmed by a positive diagnostic test) and recovered, they do not need to quarantine but should wear a well-fitting mask when around others for 10 days after the last date of their close contact.
- If not up to date on their COVID-19 vaccines (including people who are fully vaccinated and eligible for a booster but not boosted), they must quarantine for at least five days after their last close contact. People unable to wear a well-fitting mask must quarantine for 10 days.

Everyone who is a close contact, whether quarantining or not, should follow additional precautions for 10 days after their last exposure, including:

- Wear a well-fitting mask whenever they are around others.
- Monitor for symptoms, and isolate and seek testing right away if symptoms develop. Otherwise, get tested on Day 5, if possible (except that people who had COVID-19 in the last 90 days need only get tested if they develop symptoms).
  - If they test negative and are in quarantine, they should continue to be excluded from work through Day 5 after their last exposure.
  - If they test positive or if testing is not possible, they must isolate for five days after their symptoms began and wear a well-fitting mask around others for 10 days.

See Appendix: Notifying Close Contacts at the end of this document for a sample communication to notify staff identified as close contacts. If you have questions about who
qualifies as a close contact, call the NYC Health Department at 866-692-3641, Monday through Friday, from 9 a.m. to 5 p.m., and ask to speak to an epidemiologist.

**Does a staff member need a doctor’s note or negative COVID-19 test to return to work once they complete their isolation or quarantine?**
No. If they have completed isolation or quarantine, they do not need 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.

**Do the contacts of someone in quarantine also need to quarantine?**
No. They should closely monitor for symptoms and take precautions to reduce their risk of getting COVID-19.

**Do staff members need to quarantine and be excluded from work following travel?**
Quarantine after travel is recommended for people who are not fully vaccinated and required for some people visiting from outside the U.S. For more information, visit [cdc.gov/covid19travel](http://cdc.gov/covid19travel).

**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 five days, they must stay home while they wait for their test results. If a staff member has not had COVID-19 symptoms and is not in quarantine, 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 helping 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 health information. 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 until it can be cleaned. See the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention’s (CDC) guidelines on cleaning and disinfecting your facility. Visit [cdc.gov/covid19](http://cdc.gov/covid19) and search for 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. COVID-19 antibody tests 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](http://nyc.gov/covidtest). For information on COVID-19 testing, visit [nyc.gov/health/testingtips](http://nyc.gov/health/testingtips). For at home testing guidance, see on.nyc.gov/home-testing. Many sites have no-cost testing, regardless of immigration or insurance status. Remind staff to let you know right away if they receive a positive diagnostic test result.
Appendix: Notifying Close Contacts

The following is sample language that can be used to notify close contacts of their potential exposure to someone with COVID-19 in the workplace:

We are reaching out to notify you that you may have been exposed to someone with COVID-19 on [INSERT DATE(S)]. According to the New York City Department of Health and Mental Hygiene (NYC Health Department), you should complete five days of quarantine starting from the date you may have been last exposed. Quarantine includes staying home and separating from others in your household.

You should also monitor yourself for COVID-19 symptoms for 10 days after the date you may have been exposed, including taking your temperature daily and getting tested if you develop symptoms. Common COVID-19 symptoms include fever, cough, difficulty breathing, and loss of taste or smell. For a list of symptoms, visit nyc.gov/health/covidtreatments. The NYC Health Department recommends you get tested five days after exposure, 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, regardless of immigration or insurance status.

For resources to help isolate at home or a free hotel room, call 212-COVID19 (212-268-4319) or visit nychealthandhospitals.org/take-care. For a list of other resources, such as support for food, employment, health insurance, housing and more, visit nyc.gov/coronavirus and select the For NYers tab at the top of the page.

The following are additional resources about COVID-19:
- For information about isolation and quarantine, visit on.nyc.gov/quarantine-isolation.
- For information on COVID-19, visit nyc.gov/health/coronavirus.
- For information on COVID-19 vaccination, visit nyc.gov/covidvaccine.
- For information on COVID-19 treatment, visit nyc.gov/health/covidtreatments.
- For information on COVID-19 testing, visit nyc.gov/health/testingtips.
- For information on paid sick leave during quarantine or isolation, visit nyc.gov/health/covidtreatments and paidfamilyleave.ny.gov/covid19.
- For other questions, call 311 or 212-268-4319.

The NYC Health Department may change recommendations as the situation evolves. 1.31.22