Reopening New York City: Frequently Asked Questions (FAQs)

Please note, some workplaces may have additional requirements and restrictions due to the New York State (NYS) Cluster Action Initiative. To find out if your workplace is in a zone with restrictions, visit nyc.gov/covidzone. Zone designations change often, so please check this website regularly. For additional information and guidance on restrictions, visit the New York City Department of Health and Mental Hygiene (NYC Health Department)’s page on COVID-19 Guidance for Businesses and Schools.

What NYC resources are available?

- NYC is providing guidance and tools to help maintain safe working environments, including multilingual signage.
- NYC has a robust COVID-19 Test & Trace program to protect you, your employees, and your customers. For more information, see “Screening and Staying Home if Sick” below.
- NYC can help you and your employees access health care resources, including mental health care. For more information, see “Access to Health Care and Mental Health Support” below.
- NYC representatives will be in the community to assist businesses understand their obligations.

Screening and Staying Home if Sick

For questions regarding testing and contract tracing please review Handling COVID-19 Cases in the Workplace. If employers learn of an employee with a positive COVID-19 diagnostic test, they must report the case to the NYC and NYS health departments. Report confirmed employee cases to the NYC Health Department by calling 866-692-3641.

How should I screen my employees for COVID-19?

NYS requires employers to conduct employee health screening. Review the NYC Health Department Screening Tool. Remind staff to monitor their health closely and stay home if sick. Staff who arrive to work sick or become sick at work should be sent home immediately.

Employers should relax leave policies to encourage staff to stay home until they meet the criteria for ending isolation. It is also essential to promote physical distancing, healthy hand hygiene and regular and correct use of face coverings (making sure it covers both the wearers mouth and nose). These precautions are essential to helping to prevent the spread of COVID-19, especially if someone is sick but does not have symptoms.
What confidentiality rules apply to information I learn about employees from health screenings?
An employer must maintain medical information about employees in files that are separate from other personnel files. Employers must protect the confidentiality of the medical information. Businesses are prohibited from keeping records of employee health data (such as temperature data). There are some exceptions to the confidentiality requirement. For example, supervisors and managers may be informed regarding necessary restrictions on work or duties of an employee and necessary accommodations; first aid and safety personnel may be informed, when appropriate, if someone requires emergency treatment; and government officials investigating compliance with federal discrimination law must be provided relevant information on request.

What options does an employer have if an employee refuses to be screened? Can they be terminated?
It is important to explain to employees that screening is in place to protect them, their coworkers and customers. Answer any questions and concerns they may have. If an employee refuses to be screened, an employer may discipline the employee. The nature of the discipline will depend on the employer’s policies and any rights provided under collective bargaining agreements.

Can I recommend or require that my employees get tested for COVID-19?
You can recommend or require your employees to be tested for COVID-19. See this Information for Employers on Testing FAQ for more information.

What should I say when sending a sick worker home to avoid them being harassed or discriminated against by coworkers?
You should not disclose the reason the worker is being sent home to others. Health information is confidential and should not be disclosed to other employees. Tell coworkers that it is a violation of the NYC Human Rights Law to harass or discriminate against an employee because of a medical condition, such as COVID-19.

Many of my employees cannot isolate at home. What resources does the City offer?
New Yorkers who have COVID-19 or live with someone who does and cannot isolate at home may be able to stay in a hotel at no charge. Share information with your employees about the NYC COVID-19 Hotel Program available at nychealthandhospitals.org/test-and-trace/take-care. You can also call 212-COVID19 to access these services and others.

Access to Health Care and Mental Health Support

Some of my employees may not have a doctor. Where can I refer them?
- Distribute the current health care provider directory for your company’s health insurance plan to help employees find care.
• If you are a small business and do not provide employees with insurance, inform employees that they can call 311 to find free or low-cost health care.
• Provide information about free COVID-19 testing.
• Provide information about what to do when sick.

Many of our employees lost friends or family to COVID-19. What mental health resources are available?
Assure your employee that it is natural to feel overwhelmed, sad, anxious and afraid, or to experience other symptoms of distress, such as trouble sleeping. Visit the “App Library” at nyc.gov/nycwell for online tools to help manage health and emotional well-being. Staff can connect with counselors at NYC Well, a free and confidential mental health support service. NYC Well staff are available 24/7 and can provide brief counseling and referrals to care:
  • Call 888-NYC-WELL (888-692-9355).
  • Text “WELL” to 65173.
  • Chat online at nyc.gov/nycwell.

New York State’s COVID-19 Emotional Support Helpline is also available and staffed with specially trained volunteer professionals. They are there to listen, support and offer referrals to care from 8 a.m. to 10 p.m., seven days a week, at 844-863-9314.

Consider ways for your workplace to acknowledge employees who passed away, such as establishing a moment of silence, creating an online page for remembrances or holding gatherings remotely to share tributes. What is appropriate will depend on factors such as the workplace culture and the wishes of the family.

Physical Distancing

Should employees continue to work from home??
The best way to protect your employees and prevent the spread of COVID-19 is to continue remote work policies as long as possible. Continuing remote work can help protect people who must work in-person and help keep our communities safe, especially communities of color that have been disproportionately impacted by COVID-19.

Consider whether there are other changes you can make to your operations to allow as many employees as possible to work from home. If you must require employees to leave home to work, review these FAQs and the requirements in New York Forward, and implement the risk reduction strategies to keep your employees safe from COVID-19.

My employees cannot work from home. Are there other ways to reduce the number of people at the worksite?
Yes. Reduce the number of workers on site by staggering work times and days. The fewer people on site, the easier to maintain physical distancing.
Do my employees have to practice physical distancing at work? How long will physical distancing protocols last?
Yes, employees must practice physical distancing. Physical distancing and wearing a face covering are critical to stopping the spread of COVID-19. Even once other restrictions are lifted, it will be important to continue physical distancing, correct use of face coverings and healthy hand hygiene practices. Monitor notices from NYS and NYC to learn about changes to physical distancing mandates.

What should I do if, due to the nature of their jobs and the physical workplace, my employees are unable to physically distance themselves from others?
If staff may be within 6 feet of others, they must wear a face covering. In addition, it is strongly recommended that everyone wear a face covering as much as possible when in a shared indoor space, even if physical distance can be maintained. In some work settings, such as restaurants, employees must wear face coverings at all times, regardless of distance maintained. For office work and other jobs that do not require direct face-to-face interaction with customers or others, consider allowing some or all staff to telework. If telework is not an option, create as much space as possible between employees. Stagger work shifts to minimize the number of employees present at any given time. Move desks apart, if possible. Convert meeting rooms to workspaces. Ask staff for ideas. Get creative!

Are there safeguards or protocols I should put in place in high-traffic areas? For example, how many individuals should be allowed on an elevator at a time?
If possible, reconfigure high-traffic areas to allow employees to practice physical distancing. If tightly confined spaces, like elevators, are occupied by more than one person at a time, keep occupancy under the NYS required limit and require occupants to wear face coverings. Post signs at elevator banks stating the number per elevator car, directing people to wait for the next elevator if that number has been reached, and to wear face coverings. Encourage staff to take the stairs.

Manage lines inside and outside. Put tape or other markers to show people where to stand so they will be 6 feet from the person on either side of them. Leave enough room for people to pass by. Post signs reminding waiting customers of physical distancing requirements.

It is strongly encouraged that staff and visitors be required to wear a face covering in all common areas, such as lobbies, elevators, hallways, bathrooms, and pantries.

Can I have in-person meetings? Is there a maximum number for meeting attendees?
Use alternative methods to meet, such as telephone and video conferences, as much as possible. Keep in-person meetings to a small number of staff, use larger conference rooms or open spaces to meet, and maintain physical distancing of at least 6 feet. It is strongly encouraged that meeting participants be required to wear a face covering even if 6 feet of distance can be maintained.
How do staff — such as those at a warehouse or stockroom — interact with delivery workers or others who come to the warehouse?
When interacting with delivery workers, employees must follow all of the precautions they are doing at work already — maintaining distance as much as possible, wearing face coverings, and washing their hands often and avoiding touching their face. Institute other precautions such as asking drivers to remain in the vehicle and having employees use their own pens when signing for packages.

My employees need to eat lunch or have breaks on site. How should I set up lunch or break spaces?
Move tables and chairs in any lunch or break space at least 6 feet apart and post signs reminding employees to wear face coverings and keep physical distance. Identify additional large rooms to repurpose as break or lunch rooms and increase ventilation in all spaces where employees may be eating and drinking, wherever possible. Remind employees that time spent without a mask on while eating and drinking (even when with friends) increases the likelihood of COVID-19 transmission.

Wearing Face Coverings

Are my employees required to wear a face covering at work?
In all work settings, employees must wear a face covering if they cannot maintain at least 6 feet of distance between themselves and others. It is strongly encouraged that they wear them at all times when indoors and other people are around, even if 6 feet of distance can be maintained. In some work settings, such as restaurants, employees must wear face coverings at all times, regardless of distance maintained.

If an employee who cannot medically tolerate a face covering has a job that cannot be done while maintaining physical distance, the City’s Human Rights Law requires you to have a cooperative dialogue with the employee about whether there is a reasonable accommodation that you could make that will not cause your business undue hardship. For example, you may be able to reassign the employee to a position that doesn’t require working in close proximity to others, or you may be able to offer the employee the opportunity to telecommute. If other options do not work, you may be able to provide a leave of absence.

Do I need to provide face coverings for employees?
You need to provide face coverings, at no cost, to your employees. Always maintain an adequate supply. You can allow employees to bring and wear their own face coverings if they meet minimum standards. A face covering with an exhalation valve should not be used as a face covering as it allows unfiltered exhaled air to escape to others. Small businesses may be able to obtain face coverings for free. To learn more, visit nyc.gov/nycbusiness/article/free-face-coverings.
How should I handle a customer, client, or visitor who refuses to follow physical distancing and face covering rules?
Under NYS law, people must wear face coverings if they cannot maintain 6 feet of distance from others. Further, for certain types of businesses such as gyms, NYS requires customers to wear face coverings at all times. Even in businesses where face coverings are not required at all times, under NYS Executive Order 202.34, a business may set stricter rules for customers about wearing face coverings, including refusing service for those not wearing face coverings. The business can also post signs to educate customers about the NYS Executive Order requiring people to wear a face covering when outside their home if physical distancing cannot be maintained. If a customer refuses to follow a business’s rules, including rules on face coverings and physical distancing, you may ask the person to leave.

However, if the individual states that they cannot wear a face covering because they have a disability, you must discuss with the individual whether there is a way to provide a reasonable accommodation that will not cause you an undue hardship. You should try to provide alternative arrangements that are workable for your business, your staff, and other customers. These arrangements will vary based on ability of each business to make accommodations without creating a hardship on the business.

What is considered an “acceptable” face covering?
Please see this FAQ regarding face coverings.

If employees are wearing face coverings, do they need to maintain 6 feet of distance between themselves and others?
Use of face coverings should not take the place of physical distancing. Employees should stay at least 6 feet apart from others whenever possible, even when wearing a face covering. Physical distancing coupled with face coverings is critical to stopping the spread of COVID-19.

Can I require employees to wear a face covering at all times, even if physical distancing is maintained?
Yes. In general, the requirement is to wear face coverings when employees cannot stay at least 6 feet apart from others (though for some settings, face coverings are required at all times). It is strongly recommended that people wear a face covering as much as possible when in a shared indoor space outside their home, such as offices and other places of work. Employers can set a stricter policy and require the use of face coverings even if 6 feet of distance between people is maintained. However, as explained above, if the individual states that they cannot wear a face covering because they have a medical condition, you must discuss with the individual whether there is a way you can provide a reasonable accommodation that will not cause you an undue hardship.

There may be different requirements depending on the industry. Check NY Forward for details.
What if my employee refuses to wear a face covering because they don’t want to?
Educate all employees about the importance of wearing face coverings. If an employee refuses to wear a face covering at times when they are required to do so, and there is no medical reason for the refusal, the employer may discipline the employee.

How many face coverings should I provide for each worker?
Provide employees with multiple disposable face coverings or multiple cloth coverings to ensure they have a clean, undamaged face covering each day.

Healthy Hand Hygiene and Cleaning Protocols

My office space has been vacant for some time now. Are there special cleaning preparations I should take before my workforce returns?
Before returning to the workplace, conduct a routine cleaning and disinfection, with a special focus on frequently touched surfaces and objects, such as doorknobs, handles and faucets. If the building has systems such as air or water circulation, follow the manufacturer’s recommendations for restarting the system after extended dormancy.

My business space has been vacant for a while. Is the water safe for employees and others to drink?
If a building has been vacant or has had low occupancy, water in the plumbing system has likely become stagnant. Stagnant water can create risks for building occupants. Speak with your building manager about steps taken to address these risks by replacing stagnant water with fresh water from the municipal water supply. Detailed guidance for building owners, managers, engineers, operators and superintendents can be found in Guidance for Returning Building Water Systems to Service After Prolonged Shutdown.

Should I provide a hand washing or hand sanitizer station?
Yes. Placing hand sanitizer with at least 60% alcohol in all areas where there are shared surfaces, equipment and tools is a great way to promote healthy hand hygiene for your staff, clients, visitors and customers. Where possible consider installing contact-free motion censored hand sanitizer dispensers. Keep all bathrooms well stocked with soap and paper towels.

Should my staff wear gloves?
Routine glove use is not recommended. The CDC explains that in general, gloves are appropriate when cleaning or caring for someone who is sick. In most other situations, wearing gloves is not necessary and may still lead to the spread of germs. The best way to protect yourself is to frequently wash your hands with soap and water for 20 seconds or use hand sanitizer with at least 60% alcohol.

How often should I clean common spaces, like meeting rooms, kitchens and bathrooms?
Conduct regular cleaning and disinfection at least every day, and more frequent cleaning and disinfection of shared objects (such as tools), frequently touched surfaces, and high transit
areas, such as restrooms and common areas. Examples of high-touch surfaces and objects include meeting tables, chair armrests, doorknobs, cabinet pulls, refrigerator door handles, faucets, toilets and light switches. See Cleaning Guidance for more information.

Employer-owned and controlled equipment, such as hard hats and any face shields, should be sanitized at the end of each shift. Clean and disinfect the inside of the equipment, then the outside, then wash hands with soap and water.

Encourage workers who own their own hard hats and tools to follow the same cleaning protocol, including by providing the proper cleaning and sanitation products. Allow paid work time to complete such cleaning.

Can the ventilation system transmit COVID-19? What steps can I take to protect employees and others?
Current evidence is limited and does not suggest that air entering a ventilation system will transmit the virus. However, strong air movement across spaces from air conditioning units, supply air ducts or fans (personal or room fans) may move droplets beyond 6 feet. Consider:
- Directing air vents and fans to circulate air upwards from source.
- Positioning employees and customers so that they are not directly in front of air flow.
- In rooms with strong air flows, requiring employees to wear face coverings even when 6 or more feet from others.

Also, take these steps to improve ventilation, as appropriate for your space:
- Increase the percentage of outdoor air potentially as high as 100% (first verify compatibility with HVAC system capabilities for both temperature and humidity control as well as compatibility with outdoor/indoor air quality considerations).
- Increase total airflow supply to occupied spaces, if possible.
- Disable demand-control ventilation (DCV) controls that reduce air supply based on temperature or occupancy.
- Consider using natural ventilation (for example, opening windows if possible and safe to do so) to increase outdoor air dilution of indoor air when environmental conditions and building requirements allow.
- Improve central air filtration as high as possible (MERV 13 or 14) without significantly diminishing design airflow
  - Inspect filter housing and racks to ensure appropriate filter fit and checking for ways to minimize filter bypass
- Consider running the ventilation system even during unoccupied times to maximize dilution ventilation.
- Ensure exhaust fans in restroom facilities are functional and operating at full capacity when the workplace is occupied.
**How should we handle packages received by mail?**
Practice healthy hand hygiene when handling mail, including packages. This means you should wash your hands with soap and water after handling mail and avoid touching your face with unwashed hands.

**Communication and Training**

Where can I find signs to remind my employees about COVID-19 safety protocols?

How should I train my employees on COVID-19 safety protocols?
- Monitor how well your staff are implementing COVID-19 safety protocols.
- Post your safety plan in a place where employees can review it. Distribute the plan to your employees so they know what’s expected.
- Repeat training and education as needed. Have a mechanism for employees to ask questions and raise concerns.
- Be sure to train new hires, interns, volunteers, temporary workers and contractors. Use multiple means of communications: email, posting on bulletin boards, announcements.
- Communicate in languages employees understand.

Is there a visibility or size standard for the signs suggested in the guidance?
There is no requirement regarding size of signs. Post signs that can be easily seen and read by workers, customers and clients. The signs are meant to remind people about the COVID-19 mitigation practices and make it easy for them to understand requirements and best practices.

**Commuting, Travel, and Visitors**

Can my employees take public transportation to work?
Allow employees to telecommute if the job allows. Encourage staff to walk or bike to work. Create staggered schedules to support staff commuting by subway or bus so they can avoid crowds. Establish flexible lateness policies so employees can let a crowded subway go by, while also reminding employees to allow extra time for commuting. Refer employees to [Commuting Safely During COVID-19](#) guidance document.

Can my employees travel for business?
Traveling is not recommended at this time. Promote use of videoconferencing or teleconferencing when possible for meetings and gatherings that would normally require travel. Consider canceling, adjusting or postponing work-related meetings or gatherings that can only occur in-person. Also note that employees returning from travel to most other states and countries will be subject to strict [travel quarantine requirements](#) upon their return to NYS. Travel quarantine also applies to out-of-town clients and other visitors.
Will City inspectors be visiting businesses to confirm compliance?
Yes. NYC will be educating businesses about how to comply with reopening requirements. Inspectors may visit businesses to promote compliance.

**Resources Section**

**Additional Resources:**
- To find a testing site, visit [nyc.gov/covidtest](http://nyc.gov/covidtest). Many sites offer free testing.
- If you have questions, call 212-COVID19 (212-268-4319).
- For information testing visit [Information for Employers on NYC COVID-19 Testing Recommendations](http://Information for Employers on NYC COVID-19 Testing Recommendations).

The NYC Health Department may change recommendations as the situation evolves. 12.18.20