Returning to the Workplace With COVID-19 All Around – Fall 2021

September 28, 2021

For some, the pandemic has meant unemployment or working from home for many months, for others the pandemic has been a daily hazard confronted and battled on an ongoing basis. As vaccination rates increase and workplaces continue to reopen, there are more and more workers returning to the workplace. As we face the prospect of further COVID-19 variants, potential surges in infection and government mandates related to workplace health and safety measures, lets take a look at what a healthy and safe workplace might look like in the Fall of 2021.

At this point in time, so much more is known about the COVID-19 virus, than in the early days of the lockdowns in 2020. At that time, as today, we as your union have promoted the "precautionary principle" and will continue to err on the side of caution in every case where a real or perceived risk has not been assessed or controlled properly.

At every workplace, employers have a responsibility to maintain the health and safety of employees while operating a viable business venture; workers have to protect their personal health and safety as well as that of their families at home.

Remember…

"Nothing is more important than your health and safety." This must be kept in mind as you do your job on a daily basis in order to return home safely to your family. Everything else is secondary.

The employer has the responsibility and legal duty to do everything reasonable in the circumstances to protect you from hazards in the workplace, including exposure to the viruses and variants known to cause the COVID-19 disease. Workers have the duty to follow the procedures and wear the equipment given to them, as well as a duty to notify their employer about any and all health and safety concerns.

The basic workplace safety rules and responsibilities have not changed and the Internal Responsibility System is still expected to function with respect to health and safety issues in all workplaces. As workers, you still have the same workplace rights that you have always had, including:

- **the right to know about hazards,**
- **participate in workplace safety and**
- **the right to refuse unsafe work if you believe you are being endangered.**

Employers are expected to put together a return to work plan that incorporates the principles and practices that have been learned and established across all industries in response to the COVID-19 pandemic. This must be done in consultation with your workplace's JH&SC (Joint Health and Safety Committee) and union leadership within Local Public Health guidelines. Each workplace is different and there is not a "one size fits all plan," but the following basic key elements are essential:

1. The employer must have a return to work plan which includes protocols and procedures implemented in your workplace. These protocols have been put in place to protect you. The protocols and procedures may include COVID-19 vaccination policies, workplace antigen testing, infection control plans, cleaning protocols, and workplace training amongst many thing.

2. You will be expected to follow the steps of the infection control program's protocols and procedures in order to help mitigate the risk of contracting COVID-19 at work and at home.

3. Vaccination is the key to getting control of COVID-19, which has upended the world and caused so much havoc. Vaccination, however, is only one part of the COVID-19 workplace safety plan. Other factors MUST also be part of solution to protect workers from the disease and its effects.

4. An employee prescreening process must be instituted in the workplace to prevent those with symptoms from entering the workplace.

5. Employers need to maintain a clean and sanitary facility. You must demand that workplace cleaning protocols are not abandoned in light of increased vaccination uptake rates.

6. Staggered shift start times will allow for social distancing so that all employees do not congregate at entrances and exits. Social distancing of 2m should be maintained at all times if possible.

7. Workers should have mobility within the workplace without having to touch doors, receptacles and other high touch areas as much as possible.

8. Medical grade masks and other PPE must be made available in all workplaces in situations where social distancing cannot be maintained or common surfaces are shared.

9. Despite many government agencies not accepting the science, many experts contend (as we have all along) that the virus causing COVID-19 can spread via airborne pathways. It is extremely important that HVAC systems are maintained and reviewed to provide the utmost protection available, through increased air exchanges and maximized filtration.

10. In settings where the virus is present or may be present, more protective N95 (or better) respirators must be made available.

11. Everyone should understand their role in their return to work process. Clear role definitions and training for everyone will be necessary in varying degrees.

Signs and Symptoms of COVID-19

Individuals with COVID-19 have reported a wide range of symptoms - ranging from mild to severe. Symptoms may appear 2-14 days after exposure to the virus and anyone can have mild to severe symptoms, including:

- Fever or chills
- Cough
- Shortness of breath or difficulty breathing
- Fatigue
- Muscle or body aches
- Headache
- New loss of taste or smell
- Sore throat
- Congestion or runny nose
- Nausea or vomiting
- Diarrhea

This list does not include all possible symptoms. Individuals who have severe underlying medical conditions like heart or lung disease or diabetes seem to be at higher risk for developing more serious complications from COVID-19 illness.

Symptomatic Employee Isolation Protocol (at work)

If, after pre-screening protocols have been done and a worker feels symptomatic for COVID-19 at work, their leader or supervisor must be contacted immediately. The symptomatic worker will then be taken to the designated isolation area for further evaluation. Anyone coming in contact with this worker from this point forward will be required to wear personal protective equipment (PPE). The symptomatic employee will be sent home or directly to a health centre and may need medical clearance to return to work. All surfaces touched by the employee will be thoroughly cleaned and disinfected.

If an Employee Tests Positive for COVID-19

The employee is to contact HR who will discuss next steps and required documentation (if any) before the employee can return to work. It is expected that the employee will follow established public health self-quarantine protocols as well as return to work requirements. Affected employees will not be named and their privacy must be protected. Co-workers will be notified through communication channels of positive COVID-19 cases in the workplace. Close contacts with direct exposure to the COVID-19 positive employee will be directed to follow established protocols sometimes which differ in various jurisdictions on whether one is vaccinated or not. Medical clearance may be required before return to work by those affected and directed to self-quarantine.

Collective Efforts to Prevent Spread and Avoid Infection

Vaccination is the best way to effectively protect yourself from the serious effects of COVID-19. Even as vaccination rates continue to climb, COVID-19 is a hazard that may still come into your workplace through infected patients, workers, visitors and customers. Not everyone can be vaccinated, nor does the protection of the vaccines last indefinitely. Variants of concern may also affect infection rates and outcomes. Some vaccinated or previously infected people may become re-infected and be able to spread the virus. Vaccination or previous infection certainly doesn't prevent re-exposure to the virus. All other precautions must remain in place until the COVID-19 pandemic is under control.

Personal Hygiene

Washing hands is the one of the most effective way to reduce the spread of infectious diseases. Workers should be trained to presume that their hands are contaminated with viruses and bacteria after touching common surfaces, as well as anything touched thereafter. Employees should wash their hands upon entering the workplace and before going back home. Hands should also be washed before and after food preparation and before eating and drinking, as well as before and after toilet use, processing garbage, blowing one's nose, coughing or sneezing, visiting sick people or before taking medication.

Social distancing is effective and simple as a mechanism to prevent potential infection.

- Stay at least 2m from others as a normal practice.
- Eliminate contact such as handshakes or embracing coworkers.
- Avoid high touch surfaces as much as possible.
- Avoid anyone that appears to be sick, is coughing or sneezing.
- In the workplace, ensure social distancing on production lines, cafeterias, meeting areas, entrances and exits and offices.
- Shift changes must be managed to reduce infection risk through congregate settings

Disinfection

Disinfection measures must be instituted to disinfect workplace surfaces, chairs, tables and to protect employees. A high standard of cleanliness must be upheld with the disinfection protocol. If an active employee is confirmed positive for COVID-19 by a medical doctor, a deep cleaning of their work area must be carried out.

The employer's infection control team must be trained and equipped to use PPE to deal with potentially harmful chemicals used in sanitation. Employees are encouraged to use good personal sanitary practices including washing hands after bathroom use, covering coughs, maintaining social distancing, and cleaning work areas or other visited areas.

Workers must be supplied with the necessary items to keep their area clean. Self-cleaning of the workspaces should be encouraged multiple times during the shift with special attention on the most used surfaces. Doors should be propped open to alleviate touching.

Break times should be separated to allow enough time to wipe tables, eating surfaces, refrigerators, vending machines and microwave ovens. These areas should be cleaned often during each shift. Employees should be reminded to clean up after themselves, wash hands or use hand sanitizer before and after lunch.

Offices

Desks should be reassigned or blocked to ensure separation of employees. Meeting rooms should ensure that social distancing can be maintained. Remote work (if possible) is preferred to reduce the number of employees in the facility. Self-cleaning of the workspace is encouraged daily with special attention to most used surfaces such as keyboards, monitors, chairs desks and cubicle dividers.

The Water Quality in Your Facility

Whenever a workplace has been idled for an extended time period, water quality may become temporarily unsafe upon returning to the workplace. Potable water systems need to be completely flushed in order to freshen the supply and flush out any impurities that might have settled in the piping or water fountains. Flushing the system will also help eliminate harmful bacteria that would have grown in stagnant water as well as eliminating heavy metals like lead that may have leeched into the water from pipes or solder joints. The same goes for ice machines and other potable water systems (coffee machines etc...).

Aside from potable water systems, hot water systems should be sanitized according to the facility's Legionella protocols, usually through thermal disinfection or biocide use. Special care must be taken during thermal disinfection for obvious reasons. Finally, building maintenance must ensure that the facility's cooling tower systems are maintained with the correct levels of biocide to maintain bacterial control. Ask your supervisor to explain what water quality safety checks have been done on your workplace.

Information Sharing

All employees should be given the latest workplace related information concerning COVID-19 workplace status reports through authorized external or internal COVID-19 communication or information portals. Employees should also have contact information and be well aware of :

- Efforts to combat COVID-19 in the workplace
- Emergency response numbers
- First aid response requests
- Human Resources Personnel
- OHS Personnel

In conclusion, you should feel safe in your workplace – if you don't feel safe, then you are not safe! If you have any questions, you must contact your supervisor and/or member of your JH&SC to share your concerns and have them alleviated for your physical AND mental health and well being!

A robust, well-developed plan that has the support of the employer, the JH&SC and union leadership will go a long way into a functional transitioning of the workplace in a COVID-19 world.

This COVID-19 Pandemic should be regarded from the perspective of a marathon, that we have been part of for well over 18 months. We are still a long way away from crossing the COVID-19 finish line!

Keeping ourselves healthy and safe must be our first priority. Everyone has a role to play. Know your rights and use them. There is no job that is so important that it cannot be done safely!