Helping your employees return to work safely

The ongoing COVID-19 pandemic has impacted all of us, directly and indirectly. At your business, that could mean reducing your workforce or temporarily halting your operations. As a result of this extended downtime, it's reasonable to expect that your employees may have become slightly deconditioned to normal work habits.

This introduces a range of risks when they return to work. After extended time away, even normal work activities can trigger discomfort or musculoskeletal disorder (MSD) injuries.

To help protect your employees from these injuries—along with the serious health risks associated with COVID-19 itself—it's up to you to emphasize health and safety upon their return, ease their transition back to normal job duties, and recognize the difficulties they could face throughout the process.

Start by implementing the strategies below. And remember, throughout the COVID-19 pandemic, refer to the CDC (cdc.gov) and OSHA (osha.gov) for the most up-to-date information and workplace best practices.

REOPEN YOUR FACILITY RESPONSIBLY

- Hold a facility-wide meeting prior to the start of production to reinforce your company's expectations and emphasis on safety. If possible, hold the meeting using a video chat program or conference call, or in a series of small groups using social distancing and other precautions.

- Work with your safety committee to identify hazards and propose control measures.

- Conduct frequent safety meetings to address relevant topics, including protocols for reporting injuries and possible symptoms.

- Have each employee perform a job safety analysis and review their work procedures and functional job description, which details the physical demands associated with their job.

- Consider implementing a reduced production schedule at first, and gradually return to normal as more employees become reconditioned. Gather employee and supervisor feedback prior to returning to a full production schedule.

- Implement flexible work hours or staggered shifts, frequent job rotations, job enlargement, and/or micro-breaks.

- Recognize that a decrease in production is likely as you restart your operations, and plan accordingly.

HELP RETURNING EMPLOYEES AVOID INJURIES

- Develop specific acclimation plans for high-risk employees—particularly those with previous injuries or MSDs—as these individuals are more likely to reinjure themselves after a prolonged absence.

- Communicate your injury prevention program to your employees.

- Establish a formal stretching program if you don't already have one in place. Work with a staff nurse, an occupational health professional, or a physical therapist to design the program. If you already have a program in place, consider increasing its frequency.

- Train managers and supervisors to recognize the signs and symptoms of MSDs.

- Expand communication methods employees can use to report hazards, symptoms, and injuries.

- Remind employees to use two-person crews for certain operations, like moving heavy objects.

- Promote resources to help employees handle additional stress and uncertainty.

PROMOTE RESPONSIBLE PERSONAL HYGIENE

- Remind employees to practice proper hygiene, including frequent and thorough handwashing lasting at least 20 seconds.

- Provide multiple locations for employees, customers, and visitors to wash and disinfect their hands.

- Where soap and running water aren't available, provide alcohol-based hand sanitizers containing at least 60 percent alcohol.

- Provide no-touch disposal receptacles in restrooms and public areas.

- Require employees to stay home if they meet any of the following conditions:

  - They're sick

  - They've been in close contact with an individual confirmed to have COVID-19

  - They've recently traveled to an area with an ongoing spread of the virus

- Encourage respiratory etiquette, including covering coughs and sneezes.

- Remind employees to avoid touching their noses, mouths, and eyes.

MAINTAIN HEALTHY COMPANYWIDE HABITS

- Practice social distancing. Remind employees to keep at least six feet between themselves, their fellow workers, and customers. Monitor employee behavior and adjust the work environment as needed to encourage compliance.

- Discourage handshaking in favor of other, non-contact methods of greeting.

- Avoid large gatherings, including in-person group meetings.

- Provide masks and other personal protective equipment (PPE). Allow employees to wear facemasks or cloth face coverings that cover their noses and mouths.

- Clean and disinfect frequently touched surfaces. Make cleaning supplies, including disposable wipes, readily available and train employees to follow manufacturer directions for disinfecting—many products require a surface to remain wet for 10 minutes to adequately disinfect it.

- Discourage employees from using others' phones, desks, offices, and other work tools and equipment.

- Encourage employees who use public transportation to wear nitrile gloves and avoid touching handrails, doors, and other surfaces during their commutes.

- Place posters throughout the facility to encourage proper hand hygiene and social distancing.

- Develop a response plan in the event an employee tests positive for COVID-19. Be sure to include protocols for:

  - Cleaning and disinfecting

  - Communicating with other employees and the public

  - Sick pay and other financial considerations for quarantined employees

ENCOURAGE MANAGERS AND SUPERVISORS TO SET A GOOD EXAMPLE

- Demonstrate empathy, patience, and compassion with employees, and redirect negative behavior.

- Convey a calm, confident, and reassuring leadership style.

- Follow up when employees ask a question you can't immediately answer.

We're committed to helping you build and maintain a culture of safety at your business. And with our range of available resources, we'll help you establish practical safety guidelines that make sense for your business and employees.

To learn more about how we can help you manage loss-producing situations, visit sentry.com or call our Safety team at 800-443-9655.