

NECA Safety Talk: COVID-19 and other communicable exposures.

With the recent emphasis on Novel-Coronavirus, COVID-19, exposures and ongoing employer obligations, NECA wants to remind employers of the OSHA and Department of Labor Requirements to protect workers in the workplace from this and other workplace exposures. While there are many reported cases of COVID-19, nationally and internationally, it is important to review all facts concerning this virus and implement several precautions to prevent this, and other viruses from spreading and affecting jobsites across the nation.

“Coronavirus Disease 2019 (COVID-19) is a respiratory disease caused by the Severe Acute Respiratory Syndrome (SARS)-CoV-2 virus.” The current mutation is a new strain of the SARS virus and no individual has any immunity prior to an exposure. The CDC has reported that testing has begun on a vaccine but for now, everyone should prepare and plan for possible impacts resulting from COVID-19.

Since the announcement of the spread of COVID-19 from its origin overseas, world health organizations and associations have worked to develop guidance material and plans for protecting all public citizens from this virus and ensure proper information is communicated to everyone. The OSHA, CDC and WHO have provided dedicated websites with up to the minute information for all to use. While no new specific employer requirements related to COVID-19 are going in to affect, general rules, universal precautions and other work practices should be implemented to address worker and public concerns.

Please review the following links from OSHA, MSHA and WHO for additional, up-to-date information:

- <https://www.osha.gov/SLTC/covid-19/>
- <https://www.cdc.gov/coronavirus/2019-ncov/index.html>
- <https://www.cdc.gov/coronavirus/2019-ncov/communication/index.html>
- <https://www.who.int/emergencies/diseases/novel-coronavirus-2019>

Developing an overall policy for employees to follow related to illness prevention and the spread of germs and common illnesses such as cold and flu will help in meeting OSHA regulations. OSHA has now developed an employer guide, “Guidance on Preparing Workplaces for COVID-19, OSHA Publication 3990” and an alert, “Prevent Worker Exposure to Coronavirus, (COVID-19), OSHA Publication 3989” <https://www.osha.gov/Publications/OSHA3990.pdf> that provides details for worker protection detailed below:

Employers and workers should follow these general practices to help prevent exposure to coronavirus:

- Frequently wash your hands with soap and water for at least 20 seconds.
- If soap and running water are not available, use an alcohol-based hand rub that contains at least 60% alcohol.
- Avoid touching your eyes, nose, or mouth with unwashed hands.
- Avoid close contact with people who are sick.

Employers of workers with potential occupational exposures to coronavirus should follow these practices:

- Assess the hazards to which workers may be exposed.
- Evaluate the risk of exposure.

- Select, implement, and ensure workers use controls to prevent exposure, including physical barriers to control the spread of the virus; social distancing; and appropriate personal protective equipment, hygiene, and cleaning supplies.

Employers should review company policies and contracts on sick leave, family medical care leave and other federal regulations protecting employer and employee rights. Additional recommended practices related to COVID-19 include providing hand wash stations and hand sanitizer where hand wash stations do not exist. Providing Kleenex and other tissues for covering mouth and nose during coughing and sneezing along with proper trash receptacles help isolate germs and protect additional workers from exposure.

Workers should remember, if you are sick or show any signs of fever or other symptoms: Stay home, (except to seek medical care from a licensed health care provider), avoid public areas, public gatherings and public transportation. Remember to stay away from others in your family and also pets that could transmit viruses to others. Don't forget to clean and disinfect surfaces regularly including items you touch repeatedly and if possible, use disposal cups and glasses to minimize exposures.

By following the simple information found here and at the aforementioned links to OSHA, CDC and WHO websites, we can all do our part to prevent further transmission of this and all communicable viruses we are exposed to.

Questions and Answers:

1. What are Universal Precautions related to communicable exposures in the workplace?

Using precautionary techniques and/or personal protective equipment to prevent exposures and the unnecessary exposures in the workplace.

2. What should an employee do if they experience fever or show signs of respiratory issues before going to work?

It is recommended that if an employee shows signs of fever or other respiratory illness that can be communicable, they should stay home to prevent infecting other workers and follow the advice of a licensed health care provider for their recovery. Only return to work after symptoms have subsided for at least 24-36 hours.

3. What is the best technique for washing and sanitizing hands?

Washing hands under warm water using soap for at least 20 seconds is the best protection. Use hand sanitizer if soap and water are not available.

