

Preparing for the Fall and Winter Virus Season

During the fall and winter months, respiratory viruses tend to spread more widely. Before the COVID-19 pandemic, influenza (flu) and respiratory syncytial virus (RSV) were the main causes of severe respiratory disease during these times of year. Although some people have mild symptoms when they catch the flu or RSV, others get sick enough to be hospitalized, especially older or higher-risk adults. Some seasons are more severe than others based on strains of the viruses circulating and immunity to these viruses.

Respiratory disease season lasts from October through May in the United States, peaking between December and February. The timing and duration of virus activity have remained unpredictable since the introduction of COVID-19. However, approved COVID-19 vaccines were recently updated to better match circulating strains for the third time since their initial launch. This year's vaccine rollout happened sooner, as the country is coming off a wave of summer COVID-19 illnesses and hospitalizations. As additional respiratory illness activity looms, employers can plan to prepare for the continued triple threat of flu, RSV and COVID-19.

To support their workforces, employers should implement the best practices discussed in this article during the 2024-25 respiratory virus season.

Employer Guidance

As respiratory viruses and infections spread in the fall and winter, employers should do their due diligence and continue incorporating employee health and safety in workplace plans, policies and benefits. Consider the following best practices for addressing employee health and safety during this year's respiratory virus season:

- **Review organizational risks.** Even though federal, state and local mandates related to COVID-19 have sunset, employers can independently assess exposures and determine how to respond. Employers could identify the hazards and risks for their on-site workplaces and implement controls (e.g., personal protective equipment and administrative or engineering controls).
- **Establish remote work policies.** If the workforce is primarily on-site, employers can consider having a backup plan to allow employees to work from home when dealing with virus-related symptoms. Some respiratory illnesses may not be debilitating in all cases, so employees can still work but remain isolated to reduce the chances of others getting infected.
- **Review paid time off and leave policies.** Expanding leave policies, including allowing negative balances in paid-time-off banks and leave donation or sharing programs, could be helpful to employees battling illness at this time of year. Policies may also accommodate employees to take time off when they or their family members are sick.
- **Educate workers about vaccinations.** Vaccinations have been shown to reduce hospitalizations, so employers can encourage employees to get vaccinated. This fall, vaccines for the flu, RSV and COVID-19 are available. RSV vaccinations are available for adults over the age of 60. Furthermore, health experts recommend that adults get their flu vaccine and COVID-19 booster shots by the end of October.
- **Encourage healthy employee behaviors.** Employee education is also critical for healthy employee behavior changes. Aside from vaccinations, people need to get a good night's sleep, stay active and drink plenty of water to keep their immune systems strong. Employers could also encourage workers to eat a nutritious diet of healthy grains, fruits, vegetables and fiber. Employee benefits could support these aspects of personal health and wellness or even incentivize healthy behaviors.
- **Keep cleaning supplies on hand.** If employees are working on-site, it can be beneficial to have hand sanitizer and cleaning supplies available for employee use. Businesses can encourage good respiratory etiquette and hand hygiene to help prevent the spread of illnesses.
- **Foster open communication.** Employers can encourage employees to talk to their managers if they're experiencing any health issues, including long-lasting ones that may impact their performance. Training for managers could also help them respond appropriately to such conversations, which could properly address employee concerns, strengthen employee well-being and reduce legal risks.

Without local, state and federal COVID-19-related mandates, employers have more ownership of how they address the respiratory season. However, they should try to remain agile and accommodating while protecting and supporting their workforces.

For More Information

COVID-19 has become part of the respiratory virus season along with the flu and RSV. As infections and hospitalizations are expected, employers can review workplace policies and consider ways to protect and support employees who may catch a respiratory infection this season.

For the latest updates about the current respiratory virus season, visit the [U.S. Centers for Disease Control and Prevention's website](#). Contact us today for additional workplace guidance.

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