



FEATURE

Health and Safety Best Practices for Subcontractors when Staying Prepared for COVID-19 During the Current Outbreak

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The Delta variant of the coronavirus, which began appearing in the US in March 2021, now accounts for over 90% of new cases. This form of the virus is much more transmissible, likely more severe, and is affecting more younger people than the original virus. Dr. Rochelle P. Wilensky, director of the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, has said that "It is one of the most infectious respiratory viruses

we know of and that I have seen in my 20-year career." It spreads as similarly easy as chicken pox, and although fully vaccinated individuals have good protection, breakthrough cases are occurring.

This is a rapid turnaround from when President Biden announced on May 13 that we could take our masks off as a result of the distribution of vaccines. "If you are fully vaccinated, you no

longer need to wear a mask," he said, summarizing new CDC guidance and encouraging more Americans to roll up their sleeves. "Get vaccinated – or wear a mask until you do." (AP, May 13, 2021)

As a result, many employers are re-evaluating their approach to preventing further spread. There are updated steps-to-take to ensure the health and safety of subcontractors amid the pandemic.



Among the recent developments, employers are using the following approaches:

- Delaying return to the office/ workplace for employees, i.e., continuing to work from home.
- Requiring vaccinations of employees in the workplace or testing employees weekly.
- Asking for proof of vaccination (showing documentation) or attesting to having received the vaccine.
- Requiring the use of face coverings/masks for all individuals, regardless of vaccine status, or requiring those who have not received the vaccine to wear face coverings/masks unless working outside and at least 6 feet (physical distancing) from others.

Additional best practices include:

- daily tool-box talks to update and re-enforce hygiene procedures,
- frequent inspections to confirm compliance with required procedures, and
- limiting the use of pool cars and ride sharing among employees, or use of N-95 respirators when traveling with 2 passengers or more for more than 30-minutes.

Should the number of new cases continue to grow rapidly, or other variants appear, more companies are expected to take new measures to curtail the spread, including possibly more requirements for vaccinations.

Most importantly, employers should continue to follow the CDC guidelines for preventing spread, as they have from before the delta variant appeared. AIHA, the association for scientists and professionals committed to preserving and ensuring occupational and environmental health and safety (OEHS) in the workplace and community, has from the beginning of the pandemic, published guidance documents for workplaces. Recently it published a series of ***Back to Work Safely™ Guidance Documents (2nd ed.)*** for small to mid-size businesses in 27 industry sectors including the ***construction industry***. <https://www.backtoworksafely.org/construction-reopening-guidelines-covid-19>

The free guidance documents, available only in English now (and in Spanish this Fall), provide clear and actionable steps towards the safe operations of a variety of workplaces through prevention, early detection, and control of COVID-19. The 2nd editions offer practical guidance for employers to implement multiple layers of risk mitigation strategies through use of engineering controls (e.g., increased ventilation and air filtration), administrative controls (e.g., staggered shifts), and personal protective equipment (e.g., respirators and gloves).

Since conditions are changing rapidly, and to varying degrees at different locations, it is critical for all companies to continue to monitor the

spread of the virus and to apply the measures that are most effective in preventing the spread at their work sites. It is best to take a multi-layered approach, using a combination of control measures that will assure effective results, including engineering methods (e.g., ventilation and physical barriers), administrative controls (e.g., physical distancing, work from home, staggered shifts, temperature and symptom screening, infection testing, cleaning and disinfecting), as well as face coverings/masks and personal protective equipment (e.g., respirators, gloves). While mandating of vaccines has not become universal, companies should evaluate their specific needs, and encourage their employees to be vaccinated if eligible, and with a healthcare professional's consultation.

An important tool for subcontractors to continuously evaluate their specific needs, and apply critical safety practices, is the use of Job Safety Analyses (aka, Job Hazard Analysis, Task Hazard Analysis) discussed in the AIHA Back to Work Safely™ Guidance Documents. In addition, AIHA members – Industrial Hygienists – can play a vital role in assisting employers to develop plans and evaluate their workplaces to assure that controls are effectively being practiced.

Visit the AIHA's COVID-19 ***Resource Center*** to access updated comprehensive information for responding to the pandemic.

About the Author

Kevin J. McMahon, MS, CIH, is Director of Technical Services for HazTek, Inc. a safety management consulting firm that specializes in services to the construction industry. He has contributed to the Focus on Health: COVID-19 document published by AIHA and is a current member of the TAG WG5 Committee for the forthcoming ISO 45006 standard for Occupational Health and Safety Management – preventing and managing infectious diseases – General guidelines for organizations.