



GETTING AMERICA SAFELY BACK TO WORK:

How OEM Physicians Can Help Employers Safely Return Employees to Work

As America recovers from the COVID-19 pandemic, employers will need support in returning their employees safely back to work. This support needs to be provided by occupational and environmental medicine (OEM) physicians who have special training and expertise in return-to-work procedures including those issues that pertain to epidemiology and testing procedures needed for addressing communicable diseases. Physicians in this specialty are proficient in addressing issues that involve the health and productivity of workers, their families, and communities.

The question of how and when some businesses will be able to return their employees to work depends on a variety of factors that are well understood by OEM physicians. These physicians are qualified to provide support to businesses and workers in every type of industry, including health care, transportation, general industry, and manufacturing to name just a few. Specific areas where their expertise can help solve return-to-work/fitness-for-duty issues are:

- Delineating business-specific guidance to define and adjust to safe working distances and means to achieve workplace social distancing. Where social distancing is not possible due to production requirements, there are alternate means to reduce transmission risk that may be defined. This may include personal protective equipment such as masks, engineering controls such as ventilation, and administrative controls such as staggered shifts.
- Developing specific guidance to reduce the potential for workplace transmission.
- Interpreting guidance and recommendations from the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) and state and local public health authorities on what is right for each individual workplace.
- Performing respirator physicals and fit testing for employees who wear respirators after a COVID-19 infection.
- Developing guidelines and recommendations to facilitate the safe return of workers to the workplace.

OEM physicians are able to provide valuable resources and recommendations to their clients regarding policies and procedures to return employees back to work safely — for example, what work restrictions if any are needed; essential versus non-essential jobs; and testing for COVID-19 immunity.

Work Modifications

Modifications may be necessary to facilitate return to work in a safe manner. Current restrictions and other job adaptations that may be appropriate include telecommuting, masking, social (physical) distancing, hand hygiene, respiratory etiquette, disinfection of surfaces, and exclusion of the immunocompromised. Employers should consider and institute policies to help protect returning employees. CDC and the Occupational Safety and Health Administration (OSHA) have made recommendations for employers regarding workplace considerations.

Different industries have distinct and unique challenges in returning employees to work. OEM physicians understand how to interpret and apply guidance and advisories from federal and state authorities in different occupational settings.

Essential vs. Non-essential Workers

The distinction between essential vs. non-essential workers must be considered in the context of return to work. How critical an industry is to the nation helps determine the need for its workers to return. Criteria for return must balance workplace safety with the urgency of maintaining essential economic activities — for example, health care, emergency response, food, and energy production. OEM physicians recognize that return-to-work guidelines may need to differentiate between workers on the basis of job functions and essentiality.

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Testing

Testing for active viral infection and, eventually, for immunity due to past infection, will eventually be critical to return-to-work decision making. Both types of testing remain works in progress and are limited in availability at this time. Ultimately, we will need to know who is infected, who is susceptible to infection, and who is not. OEM physicians are following the evolving science in these areas to provide employers with optimal strategies.

Many governors are looking to test a large portion of their population because of the potentially high numbers of asymptomatic people. Especially in work areas where social distancing is not possible, employees should be routinely screened for symptoms of COVID-19, and if symptomatic, should be tested and quarantined. Accordingly, decisions about return to work must reflect a balance between test evidence of immunity and the lack of contagiousness, with the need to return employees to their jobs.

Currently, testing for the presence of the COVID-19 virus by means of nasopharyngeal or oropharyngeal swabs is readily available and guidelines for their use provided by CDC. Immunoglobulin blood tests can indicate previous infection and immunity; however, the interpretation of immunoglobulin test results remains uncertain. It is presumed that all positive tests reflect a history of recent COVID infection, but it is possible that some positives instead result from non-specific reactivity and/or prior infection by other coronaviruses, some of which cause the common cold. It is also not yet known whether all COVID patients will have normal immunoglobulin responses and whether such a response indicates the presence of long-term immunity and protection from future infection.

Until such questions can be reasonably answered, employers and others should be cautious in using immunoglobulin testing outside of research studies. In any event, such testing should only be performed under the direct supervision of a health care professional who understands the limitations of different tests and how to accurately interpret them, and who also can provide at least short-term follow-up to evaluate the accuracy of such programs.

Return-to-work policies must balance the safety of workers with the available evidence that individual workers are immune and/or not contagious. Maintaining safe distances and the use of safe hygiene practices, such as face coverings/masks where appropriate and hand washing and hand sanitizers should be enforced. To help transition employees back to work, it is important that return-to-work policies be clear, concise, well communicated, and consistent with federal and state guidance.

The Need for OEM Physicians to Drive Return-to-Work Initiatives

Due to their unique skill set, OEM physicians understand the challenges in different industries as well as the challenges imposed by communicable disease. As such, they are poised to facilitate return-to-work procedures and should be sought out by employers to facilitate the safe return of employees through evaluation, testing, work modifications, and development of appropriate workplace policies. No single approach will be ideal for all workplaces. OEM physicians have the skills to help employers determine which specific strategies will make their workplaces safer going forward.

To **Find a Provider** for COVID-19 related services, go to <https://acoem.org/COVID-19-Provider-Directory>.

ABOUT ACOEM

The American College of Occupational and Environmental Medicine (ACOEM) is an international society of 4,000 occupational and environmental physicians and other health care professionals. The College provides leadership to promote optimal health and safety of workers, workplaces, and environments. ACOEM maintains a database of physicians available to consult with businesses regarding COVID-19.

Clearly, our understanding of the pandemic and advice to employers will change with time as the underlying science evolves. For the latest information, visit ACOEM's COVID-19 webpage at <https://acoem.org/COVID-19>.