Getting workplaces ready to prevent and mitigate COVID 19

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Abstract:
The 2019–20 coronavirus pandemic is an ongoing pandemic of COVID-19 caused by SARS-CoV-2.
Several countries including India has resorted to countrywide lockdown limiting population movement as a preventive measure against the pandemic.
However in order to make some essential services available to the community and to continue working in the present situation or in the near future, guidelines have been issued by several international and national organisations.
Their major recommendations include 1. Developing an Infectious Disease Preparedness and Response Plan 2.Developing, Implementing, and Communicating About Workplace Flexibilities and Protections 3.Implementing basic Infection Prevention Measures 4.Developing Policies and Procedures for Prompt Identification and Isolation of Sick People if appropriate and 5.Implementing Workplace Controls.
The risk of exposure to corona virus has been classified into very high, high, medium and low depending on circumstance of exposure. Prevention measures that needs to be taken include 1.Engineering Controls 2. Administrative Controls 3. Safe Work Practices and 4. Personal Protective Equipments
Key words*: workplace, COVID 19, prevention, response.*

I.   Introduction

The 2019–20 corona virus pandemic is an ongoing pandemic of corona virus (COVID-19) caused by severe acute respiratory syndrome corona virus 2 (SARS-CoV-2). The virus primarily spreads via small droplets and   also   via   fomites.   Incubation   period   is   2-14   days.   Common   symptoms include fever, cough and shortness of breath. Complications include pneumonia and acute respiratory distress syndrome.   There   is no   known   vaccine or specific antiviral   treatment   till   date.   Primary   treatment is symptomatic and supportive. Recommended preventive measures include hand washing, using face cover, social distancing, disinfecting surfaces, quarantine from infection , isolation of sick etc[1]

Several countries including India has resorted to countrywide lockdown limiting movement of the entire population as a preventive measure against the pandemic

However in order to make some essential services available to the community and in view of the fact that as per available knowledge there is remote chance of elimination of the virus and to continue working in the present situation, guidelines have been issued by several international and national organisations like Occupational Safety and Health Administration (OSHA), World Health Organisation (WHO), Centre for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC), International Labour Organisation (ILO) , National Centre for Disease Control (NCDC) India.

A brief discussion on the guidelines is attempted

II.   Getting workplaces ready

1.To develop an Infectious Disease Preparedness and Response Plan considering all work areas and tasks performed.[2]

2.To Communicate with the employees about the plan.[3] To make sure that all have the latest information on COVID-19 from a reliable source[4] Workers should know about company's pay practices, leave policies, safety and health practices.[5] To train management and workers on how to prevent and act in case of COVID-19 infection[2]

3. To Implement Basic Infection Prevention Measures

To wash hands often with soap and water for at least 20 seconds, use hand sanitizer with at least 60% alcohol in absence of soap and water, avoid touching face with unwashed hands, cover mouth and nose when coughing or sneezing or use the inside of elbow, throw used tissues in a covered bin and immediately wash hands, avoid using other employees' things, clean and disinfect frequently touched objects and surfaces.

To practice social distancing, approximately 6 feet or 2 meters. Strategies for social distancing may be flexible worksites, flexible work hours, increasing worksite space, flexible meeting and travel options, downsizing operations, delivering services remotely.[6]

4. To Develop Policies and Procedures for Sick Employee

To encourage sick employees to stay home. If an employee is COVID-19 positive, employers should inform fellow employees of their possible exposure but maintain confidentiality. The employers should instruct fellow employees about how to proceed based on the recommendations for Community Related Exposure.[6]

Employees who are well but who have COVID-19 positive family member should notify their supervisor and follow recommended precautions. [6]

Employees who appear to have suggestive symptoms upon arrival at work should immediately be separated from others and sent home.

To be aware that some employees are at risk for serious illness which includes aged and those with chronic disease or in an immunocompromised state.

To ensure that sick leave policies are flexible and consistent with public health guidance. To maintain flexible policies that permit employees to stay home to care for a sick family member or children. Additional flexibilities might include giving advances on future sick leave and allowing employees to donate sick leave. Employers that do not currently offer sick leave may want to draft non-punitive emergency sick leave policies. Employers should not require a positive COVID-19 test result or a doctor's note to validate employees illness. This is to reduce burden of the health facilities.[5,6]

5. To Implement Workplace Controls

A. Assessing Workers' Exposure Levels and Specifying Protective Measures

The OSHA Guidance recognizes that the risk of exposure to corona virus may vary from very high to high, medium, low and this depends on circumstance of exposure.

Very High Exposure Risk: medical providers, laboratory personnel and morgue workers who are performing aerosol-generating procedures (AGP) or handling specimens from known or suspected COVID-19 patients.

High Exposure Risk: medical providers, medical transport workers, mortuary workers who are treating, transporting, or preparing people who are known or suspected sources of COVID-19.

Recommended Action: to use Personal Protective Equipments (PPE).

Medium Exposure Risk: Jobs that require close contact with (within six feet of) people who may be infected with the virus but are not known or suspected patient.

Recommended Action: Employers should provide employees with general guidance to reduce exposure. Installation of physical barriers may be considered. To offer face masks, to limit public access to worksites, to minimize face-to-face contact and to communicate availability of health resources.

Lower Exposure Risk (Caution): Jobs that do not require contact with people known to be, or suspected of being, infected with the virus nor require frequent close contact with the general public.

Recommended Action: Employers should provide employees with general guidance to reduce exposure.

Safeguards for Health Care Workers

Engineering Controls:

To segregate patients with suspected/confirmed COVID-19, by utilizing airborne infection isolation rooms (AIIRs) with proper ventilation. In absence of AIIR physical barriers or partitions in triage areas, curtains in semi-private areas, isolation tents, or other portable containment structures should be used.

To ensure that the air exhausts directly to outside, or passes through a HEPA filter, if recirculated.

To use special precautions associated with Biosafety Level 3 when handling specimens from known or suspected COVID-19 patients.

To ensure that appropriate air-handling systems are installed and maintained in hospitals.

To follow guidelines for environmental infection control in healthcare facilities.[6]

Administrative Controls:
To isolate patients with suspected/confirmed COVID-19, cohort COVID-19 patients when single rooms are not available, restrict entry into patient's room, minimize AGP, label patient's room, post signs requesting patients to immediately report symptoms of respiratory illness on arrival at the health facility and provide those patients with disposable face masks. To enhance medical monitoring of workers and provide psychological support if needed.

Safe Work Practices:
To work from "clean to dirty", limit opportunities for touch contamination, safely handle biowaste and to provide health personnel with sanitizers.
To follow standard practices of sterilization of medical devices contaminated with COVID-19.[6]

Personal Protective Equipment:
To use proper PPE when exposed to a confirmed/suspected COVID-19, use respirator when performing AGP or working within six feet of patients.
To ensure hand hygiene facilities at the point of use of PPE [5]

B. Maintaining Healthy Business Operations
To assess ones essential functions and the reliance that the community have on ones services or products. To determine how to operate if absenteeism spikes. Employers with more than one business location are encouraged to provide local managers.

C. Performing routine environmental cleaning and disinfection

D. Performing enhanced cleaning and disinfection after suspected/confirmed COVID-19 patients have left the facility:

E. Supporting respiratory etiquette , hand hygiene and social distancing
To place posters that encourage hand hygiene, ensure supplies of soap, sanitizers, water , place them in multiple locations, ensure masks availability along with closed bins to hygienically disposing them. To promote teleworking.[3,6]

F. Conducting meeting – measures to take

Before the meeting
To check the advice from the health authorities and follow. To develop a plan to prevent infection at the meeting and agree the plan in advance with the health department. To conduct meeting with minimum employees and with those not sick. To provide masks, sanitizers to the attendees. To keep attendees contact details and to share with local health authorities if needed. To identify a room for isolation if required. To have a plan for safe transfer to a health facility.

During the meeting
The venue must be well ventilated and should have the scope of practicing social distancing. To provide information on COVID-19 and the measures that are taken to make this event safe. To build trust, provide a health hotline, encourage hand-washing and respiratory etiquette.

After the meeting
To retain the contact details for at least one month. If someone was isolated the organizer to inform other participants and they should be advised to monitor themselves for symptoms for 14 days and take their temperature twice a day and if they develop even a mild symptom they should stay at home and self-isolate and call their health care provider.[3]

G. Travel advice

Before travelling
The organization should have the latest information on areas where COVID-19 is spreading and based on that should decide on upcoming tour. Tour should be planned only if necessary. To avoid sending employees who

are at a risk of serious illness and to make sure that all persons travelling are briefed by a qualified professional. To provide the employee with masks and sanitizers.

While travelling
To encourage employees to take COVID 19 prevention measures, ensure that they comply with the instructions of the authorities where they are travelling, ensure that they know what to do and whom to contact if they feel ill while travelling.

After returning
Employees who have returned from an area where COVID-19 is spreading should monitor themselves for symptoms for 14 days and take their temperature twice a day. If they develop even a mild cough or low grade fever they should stay at home, self-isolate and call their health care provider. [3,4]

III. Conclusion

The guidance discussed is advisory in nature and informational in content and is intended for planning purposes. Employers and workers to use this planning guidance to identify risk levels in their workplaces and to determine the appropriate control measures to implement. Additional guidance may be needed as COVID-19 outbreak conditions change and new information about the virus, its transmission and impacts becomes available.

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