

HR Insights



Preparing for the Fall and Winter Virus Season



Fall and winter are when viruses that cause respiratory disease usually circulate more heavily. 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. 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 been unpredictable since the start of the COVID-19 pandemic. As the U.S. Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) reports early increases in some viruses, employers can plan to prepare for peak activity. Furthermore, the CDC predicts a possible increase in hospitalizations due to new COVID-19 variants or a severe flu season paired with waves of COVID-19 and RSV cases.

With respiratory infections likely in the fall and winter seasons, it's important for employers to consider ways to mitigate or address illness among employees to help keep workers healthy and productive. This article highlights best practices for employers during the 2023-24 respiratory season.

Employer Guidance

While the COVID-19 pandemic and the public health emergency have officially ended, the coronavirus still has the potential to disrupt workplaces for the foreseeable future. As other respiratory viruses and infections spread during the fall and winter, employers should do their due diligence and continue incorporating employee health and safety in current workplace plans, policies and benefits.

Consider the following best practices for addressing employee health and safety during the 2023-24 respiratory virus season:

- **Review organizational risks.** Even though there are no longer any federal, state or local mandates related to COVID-19, 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 in these seasons. Policies may also accommodate employees to take time off when they or their family members are sick.
- **Encourage healthy employee behaviors.** Employee education is critical for healthy employee behavior changes. 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. 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.

In general, employers must stay agile and accommodating while adapting to the post-pandemic workplace. Without local, state or federal COVID-19-related mandates, employers have more ownership of how they address the respiratory season while protecting and supporting their workforces.

For More Information

Along with the flu and RSV, COVID-19 has become a part of the respiratory virus season. 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 disease season, visit the [CDC's website](#). Contact us today for additional workplace strategy guidance.

This HR Insights is not intended to be exhaustive nor should any discussion or opinions be construed as professional advice. © 2023 Zywave, Inc. All rights reserved.