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- Return to near-normal:

COVID-19 risk mitigation strategies for your workforce



Introduction

After two years of lockdowns, reopenings and false-starts, companies are welcoming employees back to the office in hopes of reinstating some sense of normalcy. In the majority of states and counties across the nation, mask mandates are being lifted, and other restrictions eased in the interest of returning to business as usual. But despite the reported [decline in the number of COVID-19 infections](#), the U.S. averaged [more than 120,000 new COVID-19 cases](#) per day in February 2022 alone. With the emergence of the Delta and Omicron variants of SARS-CoV-2 and the threat of new variants emerging, there's a real risk of cases being introduced into the workplace. So as we gather in greater numbers in the workplace, COVID-19 may continue to impact our ability to predict day-to-day operations.

So what can health and safety teams do to ensure the wellbeing of their workforce and ensure business continuity while preserving and promoting this new sense of normalcy? We believe that the answer is to make testing normal.

Over the last two years, Color has implemented a multitude of different COVID-19 safety programs to meet the unique needs of companies, corporations, and other large-scale organizations such as government entities and universities. One of the key things we learned is that friction and adoption are inextricably linked. When you remove friction and make testing accessible, fast and easy, then adoption rates go up. The closer to “normal” that testing becomes — the more invisible it becomes — which means higher adoption rates.

Whether you are already back to work or planning your return, you need a flexible and streamlined solution to make “the workplace” a compelling choice for everyone involved. In this guide we'll discuss strategies, current trends, and other important factors to consider when developing and implementing a COVID-19 safety plan that will protect your employees and your organization.



Key Takeaways



Everyone wants to get back to “normal.”

Leadership, facilities, employees, and their families – everyone is “done” with COVID. For health and safety administrators it is especially important that a program is in place so that employees are able to maintain productivity and return to the workplace safely.

Surges & waves of infections are going to continue.

Just as we’re seeing the impact of Omicron subside, experts are already warning of the next surge, anticipated to hit as soon as April 2022. We should assume that this pattern will persist through the year – and potentially into 2023.



Companies need to have flexible, adaptable policies and processes in place.

Rigid legacy policies around COVID-19 no longer work – not for the employees, and not for the business units tasked with administering safety programs. Flexibility is key so that programs and policies can adapt to any change in conditions.

Now is the time to evaluate and refresh your COVID-19 safety strategy.

It’s essential to have a thoroughly-vetted COVID-19 strategy in place to mitigate and manage enterprise risk. Even if the workplace feels stable now, there’s a significant risk of infection waves when employees soon gather from near and far.



Essentials of a safe and seamless return-to-work plan

The Omicron variant of SARS-CoV-2 is [more easily transmitted](#) than earlier variants – in fact compared to the Delta strain, Omicron is [2.7 to 3.7 times more transmissible](#). What's more concerning is that [breakthrough infections](#) in vaccinated individuals are more likely to occur. We know that transmission can be drastically reduced using the methods we are already familiar with: regular proactive testing, vaccinations and boosters, masks, social distancing, thoroughly cleaning surfaces, hand-washing, and self-isolation.

The challenge for employers, safety specialists, and office administrators is that not all of these safe practices can be mandated, so back-to-workplace policies and tactics have to accommodate a wide spectrum of scenarios. Here are the foundational activities that will help you drastically reduce risk to your employees while accommodating both vaccinated and unvaccinated team members:

- **Establish user friendly testing protocols and infrastructure** aligned to your business, division, or office. This may mean having different protocols for vaccinated and unvaccinated individuals. Overcome resistance by making testing a normal and seamless part of the day at no cost to employees.
- **Establish formal policies that encourage sick employees to stay home.** Review and update PTO and sick-leave policies to ensure employees have the flexibility to stay home when they feel sick.
- **Require or strongly encourage employees to be fully vaccinated** before returning to work. Make it easy for employees to get vaccinated by providing vaccination services on-site and incentives that motivate them to get vaccinated.
- **Improve the circulation of outside air by opening windows or doors.** Consider using portable high-efficiency particulate air (HEPA) filtration units to enhance air cleaning, especially in areas with poor ventilation.
- **Wear masks when levels of COVID-19 in the community are high.** Community levels can be checked [here](#).
- **Encourage or mandate employees to self-report their vaccination status** to help simplify safety and protocol management plans for the workplace.
- **Leverage technology to manage as much of the process as possible,** and to remove human bias. A centralized platform for managing testing and vaccination, tied to your HCM systems, will enable you to monitor overall COVID-19 infection rates, reduce friction, and take action in the event of a spike.
- **Reduce the risk of transmission between workers** by considering dividers in communal areas, at employee desks, meeting rooms, and lunch and social areas. Ideally these dividers should be clear plastic, so that employees can see each other and their surroundings through them. Frequently sanitize high-touch areas, and provide employees with easy access to cleaning and sanitization supplies so that they can clean their own areas as they see fit.



At Color, we've digitized our self-screening questionnaire and tied it to our desk reservation and building access systems. If you don't pass the questionnaire, you can't reserve a desk or enter the buildings.

Hybrid work

Employees may yearn for the social connection, informal interactions, and collaborative environment that come with on-site work. At the same time, they have likely become accustomed to the flexibility that working from home offers, with less commute time and more time with family and pets. Employees have different needs and concerns about returning to work such as the potential risk of exposure for vulnerable children or elderly at home – and employers should consider this in designing their strategies. Be flexible and compassionate in your policies, and advise managers to do the same.

If the nature of the work allows it, consider offering a flexible work schedule in which specific teams come to the workplace on certain days. This enables you to optimize team facetime while minimizing the number of employees in the workplace at any one time, making social distancing easier.

Communication

There is no such thing as over-communication when it comes to your employees' physical, mental, and emotional well-being. Keep your teams informed with clear, detailed, and frequent communication. This will help them understand what to expect, while reassuring them that you have their safety and best interests in mind.

Frequently communicate what the company is doing to maintain a safe work environment:

- **Let employees know you're committed to their health and safety** by sharing all the steps you are taking and inviting their feedback. This will help them feel confident that being back at work won't mean increased risk to them and their families.
- **Quickly address any employee concerns.** Encourage a culture of transparency and open communication in which employees feel comfortable raising concerns and reporting violations without fear of repercussions.
- **Enlist the help of employees.** Establish a safety task force and invite employees to collaborate with people operations and office safety teams to suggest, review, and implement new policies and procedures.

Vaccinations

Encouraging vaccinations and boosters is the cornerstone of mitigating risk and keeping employees safe. [The data](#) overwhelmingly suggests that having a highly vaccinated workforce is the best way to mitigate transmission of COVID-19 in the workplace. Additionally, [boosters have been shown to prevent transmission](#). However the topic is a contentious one, and not everyone's on board with vaccinations. In February 2022, about [64% of the eligible U.S. population was fully vaccinated](#), and only roughly 50% of the eligible U.S. population had received a booster.

Vaccine mandates

A growing number of companies are mandating vaccination to enter the workplace, with some suspending or terminating employees who refuse to comply. However, [several states have passed legislation](#) limiting the ability of employers or local public sector organizations to mandate vaccines.

Nevertheless, encouraging, incentivizing, or even mandating vaccinations in order to enter the workplace are all legal practices, [according to the U.S. Equal Employment Opportunity Commission](#), as long as reasonable accommodations are available under the Americans with Disabilities Act and Title VII of the Civil Rights Act. Reasonable accommodations for those whose disabilities or religious beliefs that prevent them from getting a vaccine include:



**Asking
unvaccinated persons
to wear masks**



**Undergoing
regular testing**



**Maintaining
social distance**

In any case, it's critical that you have a clear picture of your risk profile, which means knowing the overall status of vaccinated and boosted employees. This can help you decide where to implement increased testing, safety, and compliance measures when you reopen, or decide to keep employees remote until conditions change.

We recommend a three-fold approach:

- **Mandate or strongly encourage vaccines** for those employees who will be returning to the workplace. Support employees getting vaccinated by offering incentives, such as time off, or by providing vaccinations to employees on-site.
- **Track who is vaccinated** by asking employees to either provide proof or voluntarily report their vaccine status. A simple “yes” or “no” will suffice, and keep you within HIPAA requirements.
- **Implement adaptive protocols** for vaccinated and unvaccinated team members. Have a plan for more drastic measures – such as deferring your reopening plans – if the risk factor of the local group is too high.

| Breakthrough cases & vaccine effectiveness

Fully vaccinated individuals who contract SARS-CoV-2 may experience less severe symptoms or none at all. Still, when asymptomatic, fully vaccinated people can spread the virus to others; although they appear to spread the virus for a shorter period of time [compared to unvaccinated individuals](#).

In December 2021 (amid the surge of the Omicron variant), [the CDC reported](#) that adults who were unvaccinated had a 300% higher risk of testing positive for SARS-CoV-2 compared to fully vaccinated adults. Furthermore, the rate of testing positive for SARS-CoV-2 was about five times as high for unvaccinated adults than the rate among adults who received a booster.

Hospitalizations and deaths from COVID-19 have also found to be significantly higher among unvaccinated individuals. Between July and November 2021, the number of deaths for unvaccinated adults was about 16 times higher than for individuals who were fully vaccinated.

Antiviral medication

Antivirals are a type of medication taken orally that are being used to prevent severe disease and hospitalization due to COVID-19. They work by preventing the SARS-CoV-2 virus from replicating in the body. Importantly, these medications must be administered within a few days of symptom onset to be effective at reducing symptoms and shortening the length of illness. [Studies have shown](#) that when taken early in the course of disease, some antivirals may reduce the risk of covid related hospital admission or death by up to 89%.

The FDA has issued Emergency Use Authorizations for antivirals to treat individuals with the highest-risk, but the key is efficiently identifying and quickly delivering treatment to those individuals. One way in which the US government aims to efficiently deliver care is through the nation-wide ‘Test-to-Treat’ initiative. This program provides individuals with antiviral treatment immediately after testing positive for SARS-CoV-2 at a pharmacy. While this program has the potential to have far reaching impact, it is important to consider that the success of this program may vary by state, depending on the types of pharmacies present in that state. The effectiveness of this program in your community should be considered when updating your safety strategy.

Understanding the different types of COVID-19 tests

When considering return-to-work COVID-19 testing strategies, it's helpful to first understand the [different kinds of tests available](#). [COVID-19 tests each serve a different purpose](#) and have different limitations. There are two main types of diagnostic tests for detecting an infection:



Molecular tests



Antigen tests

Molecular tests, also called nucleic acid amplification tests or **NAATs**, detect the genetic material of SARS-CoV-2 – the virus that causes COVID-19 – and are considered the gold standard for accuracy. NAATs typically require upper or lower respiratory samples, such as nasal swabs, throat swabs, or even saliva. Two types of NAATs are **RT+/-PCR** and **RT+/-LAMP** tests, both of which are highly sensitive and accurate. NAATs can be lab-based, with a turnaround time of 1-3 days, or rapid point-of-care tests, with a turnaround time of 30 minutes to 1 hour.

Antigen tests detect the presence of a protein that's part of the SARS-CoV-2 virus. Sometimes referred to as “rapid” tests, most antigen tests can produce results without a laboratory in 15 to 30 minutes. Speed and cost are the main advantages of antigen tests, but they are not as sensitive when there is low viral load, which occurs in the early stages of infection. This is a trade off as early detection of infection is important for downstream activities like isolation or treatment.

Learn more about the different types of COVID-19 tests, what they detect, how long results take, how samples are collected, and more. See Color's testing comparison matrix [here](#).



Recommended workforce testing strategies

As COVID-19 needs evolve, your testing strategy should too. Organizations are reevaluating their testing strategies and are thinking of ways to be more cost effective and incorporate systems and procedures that are seamless without sacrificing efficacy.

The following strategies are informed by Color's experience with other employers, grounded in new research and updated CDC recommendations as we enter this next phase of COVID.

Regular testing for unvaccinated individuals

The [CDC](#) and [AMA](#) found that unvaccinated individuals are 3-5 times more likely to have a positive COVID-19 test than vaccinated individuals. Which is why employers with low vaccination rates will benefit from implementing a testing program to monitor and protect their unvaccinated employees. Screening these individuals will help identify those who are infected prior to symptom onset and isolate them before they can spread the infection to others. In the event of a positive COVID-19 case on-site or an increase in community transmission, proactive testing can be expanded to include the entire population, regardless of their vaccination status.

This type of program is achieved by:



1. Collecting vaccine status to track and identify

unvaccinated individuals who are eligible for regular testing.



2. Setting a cadence of reminders and dashboard tracking

for compliance, and ability to modify cadence based on unique company policies.



3. Establishing self reporting

of test results with photo upload for eligible individuals.



4. Distributing testing

at all designated locations onsite at the company or at home for remote employees coming onsite.

Events at work

Before bringing back large numbers of employees, whether it be for a corporate event or simply a large-scale gathering, a best practice is to ask employees to complete pre-arrival testing, to reduce the chance of introducing a case on-site. This can be supplemented with other safety measures and protocols that can ensure end-to-end event safety.

This type of program is achieved by:



1. Pre-event at-home testing

accompanied by a cadence of testing reminders for compliance.



2. Self reporting of test results with photo upload

for event entry.



3. Rapid testing support during the event

to screen and mitigate risk of exposure between at-home test and onsite arrival.



4. Setting up AP integrations

to leverage real time data feeds for access management.

Testing as a benefit

Companies are recognizing that offering their employees testing as a benefit can help attract and retain talent. Companies are providing more flexibility and supporting their employees and their dependents who may have additional health risks and want to test even when it is not required.

This type of program is achieved by:



1. Offering onsite workflows

for kit distribution and drop off for all sites to extend access and encourage utilization of this benefit.



2. Capping the number of tests

per individual per week to mediate costs based on desired volume for your workforce.



3. Setting up an ordering portal

for at-home testing so that employees can request tests for various use cases such as before or after travel, if they are experiencing symptoms, etc.



4. Establishing reporting guidelines

based on a company's need to collect population data for compliance purposes.

Symptomatic or exposed testing

As employees return to the office and the number of active cases continues to decrease, we foresee a shift from proactive testing to reactive testing for individuals either exposed to an individual with a confirmed COVID-19 case or for someone who may become symptomatic. As a result, employers may opt to set up testing that can be conducted on an as-needed basis.

This type of program is achieved by:



1. Establishing a cadence of symptom self-reporting

for eligibility management.



2. Setting up at-home testing workflows

for eligible employees to screen for potential COVID-19 positive cases.



3. Setting up self-reporting of test results with photo upload

to ensure that any COVID-19 positive individuals would not come onsite and expose others.

| Color's models to determine testing frequency

Epidemiological models can be an important tool for helping understand epidemic progression. To determine the best testing cadence to mitigate outbreaks, Color's science and medical teams use the [SEIRS+ model](#), which was developed in collaboration with Carl Bergstrom Ph.D., Ryan McGee, and colleagues at the University of Washington. We also applied the SEIRS+ model to [partially vaccinated populations](#). Click the links to explore the models, read our memo on [proactive testing in a partially vaccinated population](#), or check out [our blog post](#) outlining key considerations for risk mitigation following Omicron.

Testing program best practices

Over the past two years, Color has helped hundreds of organizations establish best practices for keeping their people safe with testing programs.



Here are the top 3:



1. Focus on scalability and flexibility.

Before launching a testing program within a workgroup in a large organization, ensure that it can grow to support a much larger number of people. This applies to testing modalities, technology, and the resource and lab capacity of the partner you choose to work with. As many organizations have learned, rapid testing programs are entirely dependent on the supply of kits available from a small number of vendors. This can lead to shortages like those seen in the second half of 2021, which have a dramatic impact on an organization's ability to execute on their testing plans.



2. Customize testing for different employee subgroups.

It can be beneficial to set up subgroups, based on an understanding of the risk profile and needs of that group. For example, if one group of employees is on-site four days per week and working in close proximity to each other, the risk of an outbreak might be higher than for a group of employees who work on-site only one day per week. Similarly, the local vaccination and positivity rates may vary across office locations. Use this information to define subgroups or cohorts, and determine the appropriate testing cadence for each. This helps you manage resources and cost while keeping your employees safe.



3. Collect data and make informed decisions.

Effective data capture, management, and analysis needs to be the foundation of your testing and response planning. While most organizations have access to testing program data, very few have integrated all data points into a single view that supports decision making. A platform that can combine test and vaccine data with self-reported health checks into a single data set that can be quickly reviewed and analyzed makes this easy. Real-time reporting on population vaccine and positivity rates can inform case management and the overall program protocols. For example, if positivity rates start to climb at one site, administrators can increase the testing frequency at that site only, or across all sites with a similar cohort profile. Data can also support contact tracing, resource planning, and overall compliance with corporate or government guidelines.

Lab-based PCR self-testing kits enable you to expand from a single site to dozens with minimal labor overhead, and much lower dependency on specialized test kits. Similarly, using software application programming interfaces (APIs) to connect testing and vaccination reporting systems with existing enterprise systems enables you to adapt to changing needs on the fly. For example, you can dynamically update the list of eligible people as well as the testing cadence by exchanging data with your human resource information system (HRIS). This lets you store data and surface it within existing systems so that program managers can work faster. Overall, designing a program for scalability means making initial decisions that enable easy expansion when requirements change.

- **Color in action**



Color enables Blue Diamond to operate safely throughout the pandemic

Blue Diamond partnered with Color to implement a flexible surveillance testing program that let the business continue to operate while keeping employees safe. Testing has been key for Blue Diamond locations to remain open, safe, and successful during the pandemic, with zero closures throughout the pandemic.

Read more about the partnership [here](#).

Conclusion

There are still many unknowns about the COVID-19 virus trajectory and impact, but through it all we've learned a lot about managing risk. If you follow the general guidelines outlined, and maintain a thoughtfully designed COVID-19 risk mitigation program, your business can confidently and safely welcome employees back to the workplace.

You may also be interested in:



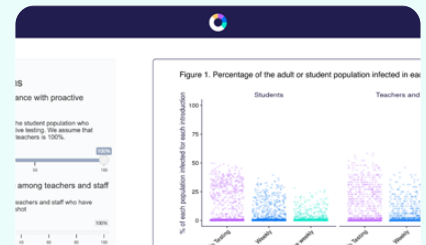
What to Look for in a COVID-19 Testing & Vaccination Partner

[Read more](#) →



Color's Complete Platform for COVID-19 Workplace Safety

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Interactive Modeling Tool for Testing & Vaccinations in the Workplace

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Ready to discuss your return-to-work program?



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About Color

Color's scalable public health infrastructure makes it easy for employers to stand up population-scale testing and vaccination programs.

Employers can seamlessly create testing and vaccination programs of any size, assign different testing cadences to groups based on vaccination status and other criteria, automatically remind employees of their next test, and send notifications about their testing status and results by email and/or SMS. Color gives human resources and workplace safety teams the ability to manage populations on a macro level, and quickly identify and isolate cases before they lead to outbreaks.