# Healthy Workplace Practices during the COVID-19 Pandemic

### May 28, 2020

Good social practices and hygiene are vital as businesses develop plans for resuming operations during the COVID-19 pandemic. The risk for contracting and spreading the virus remains, but some basic guidelines for businesses and their employees can help ensure safety.

While it is still recommended to work from home to reduce the risk of spreading the virus, for some people working from home is not feasible. As employees return to work, safety is the top priority. Safety efforts should include:

- Maintaining social distancing via telework and rotating/staggering in-office shifts
- Ensuring a safe and sanitized environment in all areas (offices, individual workspaces, common spaces, kitchen and dining areas, conference rooms)
- Providing supplies (building access devices, spacing stickers, janitorial supplies, personal hand sanitizers, masks)
- Promoting physical and psychological safety
- Preparing for and addressing COVID-19 illness in the office
- Keeping employees informed with ongoing communications

## The Basics

- Work from home if possible
- If you must come to your workplace, screen for COVID-19 at home every day
- Wear masks when safe distancing practices cannot be maintained

## Establish Controls to Minimize Spread

- Encourage telework and staffing plans that **minimize the number of people in one physical space**
- Create **physical barriers** between people
- **Reduce physical contact** by redistributing responsibilities and using technology
- **Wear non-medical cloth masks** in spaces where physical distancing is not an option



Physical Distancing

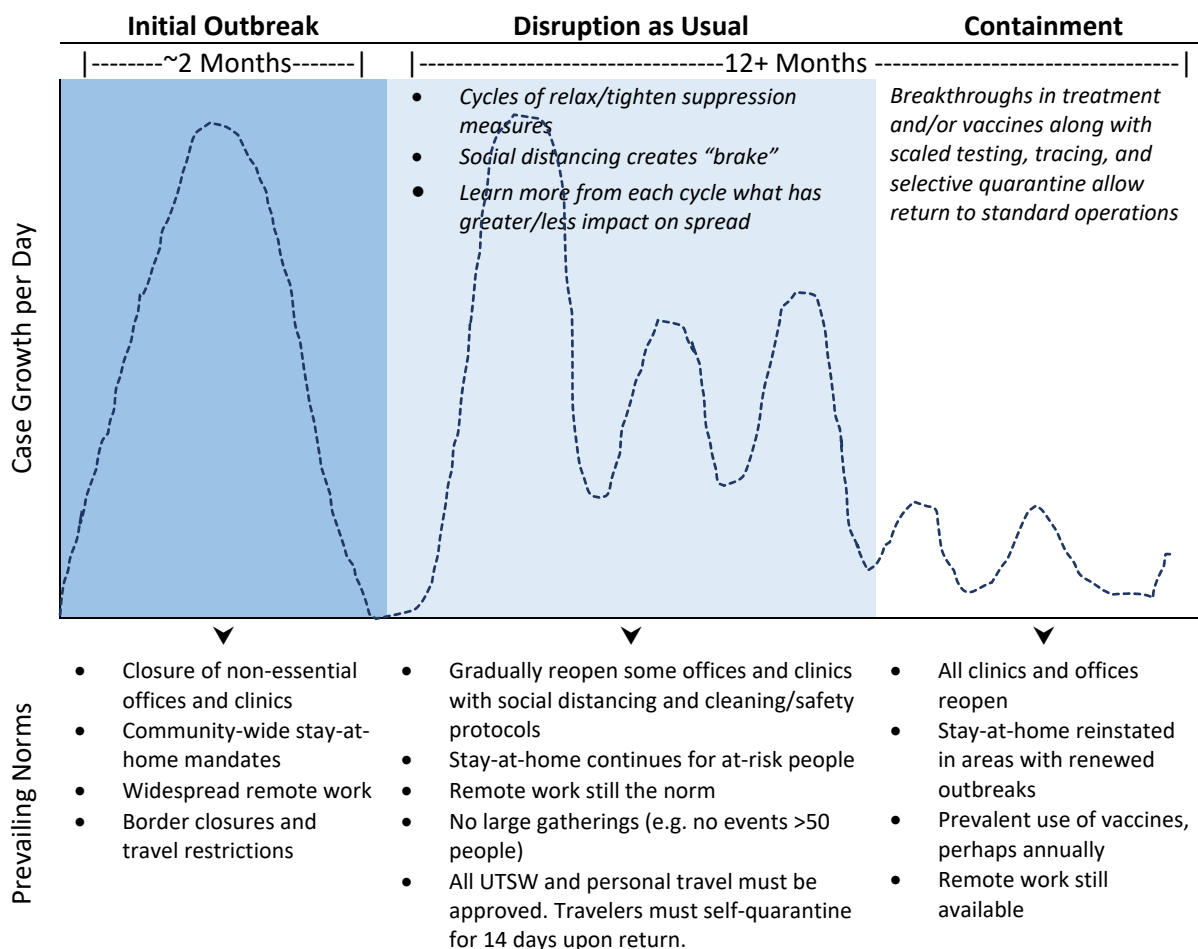Engineering Controls

Administrative Controls

PPE
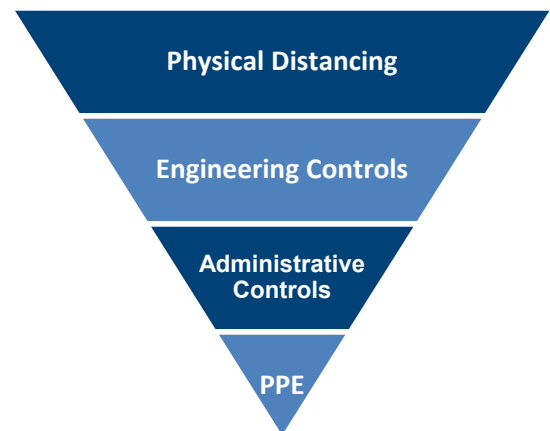
## COVID-19 Phases

**Phase 1** – Initial Outbreak: Only essential businesses (with required personnel) open

**Phase 2** – Suppression: Gradual opening of nonessential businesses with limited customer/personnel occupancy allowed – masking and safe distancing rules in place; increased testing (current state)

**Phase 3** – Containment: Full occupancy with eased masking and safe distancing rules; routine testing and possible annual vaccinations

# COVID-19 Influence on Institutional Activities in the Months Ahead

| **Initial Outbreak** | **Disruption as Usual** | **Containment** |
|---|---|---|
| |-------~2 Months-------| | |-------------------------------12+ Months -------------------------------| |

- *Cycles of relax/tighten suppression measures*
- *Social distancing creates "brake"*
- *Learn more from each cycle what has greater/less impact on spread*

*Breakthroughs in treatment and/or vaccines along with scaled testing, tracing, and selective quarantine allow return to standard operations*

**Case Growth per Day**

**Prevailing Norms**

| | | |
|---|---|---|
| - Closure of non-essential offices and clinics<br>- Community-wide stay-at-home mandates<br>- Widespread remote work<br>- Border closures and travel restrictions | - Gradually reopen some offices and clinics with social distancing and cleaning/safety protocols<br>- Stay-at-home continues for at-risk people<br>- Remote work still the norm<br>- No large gatherings (e.g. no events >50 people)<br>- All UTSW and personal travel must be approved. Travelers must self-quarantine for 14 days upon return. | - All clinics and offices reopen<br>- Stay-at-home reinstated in areas with renewed outbreaks<br>- Prevalent use of vaccines, perhaps annually<br>- Remote work still available |

Adopted from Oliver Wyman/Mercer DFW COVID Response Collaboration Presentation

## Social Distancing in the Workplace

For people who must work in an office with co-workers, it is essential to understand we are in a "new normal" for the foreseeable future, which, along with masks, means social distancing. The now-standard social distance of six feet between people should be maintained in the workplace whenever possible. It follows, then, that the nature of office layouts, meal breaks, and meetings must change.

It is recommended to stagger both the position of workers (e.g., use every other cubicle) and work schedules to minimize the number of workers in the office at one time. This will help maintain six feet between workers. Maintaining this distance also means that lunchtime and breaks are different than before COVID-19.

Multiple, daily gatherings of co-workers in breakrooms or kitchens for meals or breaks must now be carefully planned to avoid a concentration of several people in one room. This is especially important in these types of rooms as masks can't be easily worn while eating. Consider a sign-up sheet or schedule for breakroom and kitchen use. Ideally, workers should bring food from home and eat at their workstations, when possible.

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## Masks in the Workplace

While good social distancing of six feet should be practiced, sometimes it is not practical or even possible to maintain that distance between co-workers. In such cases, the use of masks in the workplace is essential.

Since masks are often awkward and inhibit communication, the following considerations addressing the sociological and psychological challenges of wearing masks may help office workers adapt and effectively communicate while wearing a mask.

### Be Expressive

- Communicate with audible inflection – your tone of voice reveals much about what you are trying to say.
- Eyes are also expressive, so use your eyes and eyebrows to show, for example, surprise, approval, or dissatisfaction. You can even "smile with your eyes."
- Conversely, learn to read people's eyes and eyebrows for the same reasons.
- Understand that body language can convey as much meaning as words.
- "Yes" and "no" can be communicated with nodding and head shaking.

### Be Polite

- Politeness is key as some people may be frustrated about the process of wearing masks.
- Acknowledge the difficulty of communication – we're all in this together.
- Joke about it. It's okay to laugh at ourselves.
- Be patient with co-workers as they address the challenge of wearing a mask.
- Thank co-workers for wearing a mask and respecting your safety.

### Be Practical

- Have an ample supply of masks in order to change them regularly.
- Verbalize your needs if you want to go outside and take a break from wearing a mask.
- Request co-workers wear a mask – peer pressure is a positive in this case.
- If you are confident you know the proper way to fit/wear a mask, offer advice to others who may be struggling with using masks correctly.

### Be Flexible

- Questions and clarification are critical.
- Repeat yourself when necessary, and don't lose patience.
- Be open to feedback regarding your communication and how to improve it.
- Use other forms of communication if someone is struggling to understand (writing pad, dry erase board, email, etc.)

## Cleaning/Janitorial Recommendations

The foundation of personal safety within the context of COVID-19 is hygiene. Enhanced cleaning that aligns with the most current CDC recommendations and guidelines is recommended (offices, individual workspaces, common spaces, dining areas, conference rooms, restrooms).

Measures to clean and disinfect high-touchpoint and high-traffic areas should include:
- Door push bars, push plates, and knobs
- Drinking water fountains
- Elevators (cab rails and interior and exterior call buttons)
- Information/reception desks
- Waiting areas
- Light switch plates
- Breakrooms and appliances, including:
    1. Refrigerators
    2. Microwave/toaster ovens
    3. Coffee/drink dispensers
- Restroom surfaces
- Stair handrails
- Vending machines

## Personal Workspaces and Hygiene

Important steps in an effective defense against spreading germs include maintaining a clean personal workspace and practicing good personal hygiene, including frequent handwashing/hand sanitizer use and using common sense when in the restroom.

Employees should clean personal workspaces at the start and end of every day or shift using an approved disinfectant or disinfectant wipes. Cleaning should encompass all workspace surfaces, including desktops, computer keyboards and mice, frequently used pens or pencils, and chairs (especially the chair arms).

**Frequent handwashing should always follow CDC guidelines.** Washing your hands with soap and water is always best, but the use of hand sanitizers with greater than 60% ethanol or 70% isopropanol content is acceptable when handwashing is not possible.

Using shared or public restrooms can be safe if good common sense is applied.
- Wear a mask.
- Maintain social distancing of six feet whenever possible.
- Avoid bringing personal/extraneous items into the restroom.
- Wash hands for at least 20 seconds.
- Avoid hand dryers, and always use disposable towels.

## Daily Self-Check at Home

All workers should take their temperature and observe their overall health *at home before leaving* for the workplace. People should stay at home if they experience:

- Fever (100˚ F/37.7˚ C or higher)
- Mild cough
- Diarrhea
- Fatigue
- Chills
- Muscle pain
- Headache
- Loss of taste or smell

## Visitors

It may be necessary to allow some visitors, clients, and vendors into the office.

- Control access to visitors.
- Prohibit access for nonessential visitors.
- Communicate the requirements for entry to visitors *before* they visit. (Create a standard visitor-requirements document for employees to provide to their visitors prior to the visit.)
- Enforce hand sanitizer use at office entrances.

## Responsible Meetings

Businesses whose pre-pandemic work cultures included frequent meetings should switch to virtual settings and avoid multiple workers in one room. Keep in mind this applies not just to scheduled meetings with formal email/calendar invitations, but also to impromptu, ad-hoc meetings for a brief discussion or status update before the end of the day. A few workers popping into someone's office for a quick decision constitutes a meeting.

If a meeting is absolutely necessary, all participants should wear a mask and maintain a six-foot distance. Meeting participants should be known colleagues – not strangers – as it is important to know about the general health of everyone at the meeting. Keep a log of meetings (date, time, location, list of attendees, and contact information) to allow the "retracing of footsteps" should a participant later test positive for COVID-19. During the meeting, avoid sharing dry erase markers, pens, pencils, keyboards, computer mice, etc.

## For more information on how UT Southwestern is responding to the COVID-19 pandemic, including the latest policies and procedures, visit utswmed.org/covid-19.

## Questions? Contact PublicAffairs@UTSouthwestern.edu.

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