

RETURN READY™ THOUGHT LEADERSHIP

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# Employers face critical challenges in returning employees to work safely



# The constantly evolving domestic and global COVID-19 situation presents a challenge to employers who are wondering how best to return employees to work safely.

The challenges revolve around questions such as which employees should receive COVID-19 testing, when they should be tested, and how vaccinations should be made readily available. These are complicated questions whose answers require consulting many disparate sources of information.

It is important for employers to have a strategy regarding return to work; all of these issues are relevant to today's imperative to move forward confidently while maintaining the health of the workforce.

In this paper we provide guidance on how to approach the critical issue of bringing employees safely back to work.



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# With vaccination underway, do we still need testing?



## Vaccines are effective

The U.S. Food and Drug Administration (FDA) has granted emergency use authorization to three highly effective vaccines to date, with more to come. The three vaccines that have been authorized for emergency use by the FDA are: Pfizer BioNTech, Moderna, and Johnson & Johnson (Janssen). Distribution of vaccines has accelerated and will continue into spring and summer of 2021.



## But not everyone is getting a vaccine

The CVS Health collected hesitancy data indicates about 30% of the population is still hesitant on vaccination.<sup>1</sup> Therefore, it is reasonable to assume that a portion of the population will not be immunized.

With vaccine hesitancy still present, federal and state governments are looking to partners, like employers and CVS Health, to help make vaccines more convenient to access and enhance public education efforts.

Trusted sources have a critical role to play in helping communities overcome hesitancy. We share up-to-date facts about the vaccine in our stores and business units to the populations we serve, and use public service announcements, mail, email, text outreach, and social and digital channels to engage consumers.



## Vaccine immunity is not complete

It is important to note that vaccines are not 100% effective and are aimed at preventing moderate-to-severe disease; while some evidence exists that asymptomatic spread is also curbed, individuals might still carry and transmit the infection.<sup>2</sup> This has implications for policy guidance for vaccinated individuals, that is expected to change with further guidance from the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC).



## The length of vaccine immunity is variable

It is currently unknown how long vaccine-induced immunity will last, but the most recent evidence indicates that it will last for at least six months.<sup>3</sup>



## Variant strains are circulating

In addition to the duration of vaccine protection, it is also important to consider the degree of protection provided against variant strains of COVID-19 that are already circulating, fueled by hot spots of infection. As continued community transmission occurs, there is the possibility of new variants to arise that are more capable to escape vaccines.



All the vaccines currently approved for use in the U.S. provide significant protection against COVID-19 variants and are still effective at preventing severe infection and death.

## What is the role of testing in the vaccination era?

The ultimate goal of our nation's vaccination campaign is to reach herd immunity in our country's population. Attaining herd immunity depends on several variables, including rate of population vaccination, duration of natural and vaccine-induced immunity, and influence of variants on spread of disease.<sup>4</sup>

Approximately 80% of children and adults will need to receive a vaccine to establish herd immunity.<sup>5,6</sup> Until then, testing will allow employers to continue with the best approach to mitigating spread of disease: test, trace, and isolate.

Per recent CDC guidance, vaccinated workers no longer need to be restricted from work following an exposure as long as they are asymptomatic, and they can be exempted from routine screening. People are considered fully vaccinated for COVID-19 two weeks after they have received the second dose in a two-dose series (Pfizer-BioNTech or Moderna) or a single-dose vaccine (Johnson & Johnson [J&J]/Janssen).<sup>7</sup> However, there is currently no definitive end point to how long someone can be considered fully vaccinated, given circulating variants and uncertainty of immunity longevity. Some employers may not wish to collect and monitor detailed health information such as vaccination status.



**Testing will continue to be relevant even as vaccinations become more widespread.**

There are several reasons to continue COVID-19 testing during and after vaccine distribution, including the ability to:

- ✓ **Quickly identify and triage infected individuals**
- ✓ **Limit spread of disease and protect larger groups during case surges**
- ✓ **Protect more vulnerable populations**
- ✓ **Enable return to work or maintain protective 'bubbles' in close quarters<sup>8</sup>**

## Who should be tested?

While overall testing needs might lessen, testing continues to be important in select situations. Even if the local population is vaccinated, situations that bring together people from multiple geographies (cruises, airlines, employees traveling on vacation or on business) will necessitate continued testing.

Additionally, seasonal demand for testing will likely spike, especially during the traditional northern hemispheric cold and flu season (first quarter of calendar year) when respiratory illnesses circulate.



## How do we approach this complex situation?

We recommend on-site testing for those settings where the risk stratification of employees warrants it. This may include:

Certain employee cohorts that are critical to business continuity:

- ✓ **Performing essential functions, (sales, etc.)**
- ✓ **Senior executives**

Interaction with vulnerable population and/or customer base:

- ✓ **Hospital-based work**
- ✓ **Nursing home staff**

Worksites with inability to maintain physical distancing:

- ✓ **Manufacturing**
- ✓ **Oil rigs**
- ✓ **Factories**
- ✓ **First responders**
- ✓ **Film production crews**

High level of engagement with the public:

- ✓ **Retail workers**
- ✓ **Public transit**
- ✓ **Airline employees**

Immunocompromised people:

- ✓ **Due to specific medical conditions or medications**
- ✓ **At higher risk for complications due to infection**

## The right testing strategy

Employers should identify how they would like to use diagnostic testing for their employee base, the locations they wish to test, and which testing approach makes the most sense, on-site versus home-based.



### Home testing

Home testing may play a role in testing employees after they have traveled to an area that is considered high risk or before traveling.

Many home tests that can be obtained without prescription now exist on the market after the FDA lowered the sensitivity threshold for authorization from 90% to 80%.

Home tests offer convenience at the price of slightly reduced accuracy, as even the best-in-class antigen tests only perform highly in symptomatic populations.



### On-site testing

Employee testing can be approached in two different ways:

1

In settings where fully vaccinated employees are challenging to identify for various reasons, we recommend testing solutions be made available to all employees at a given time.

2

If fully vaccinated employees can be safely identified in real time and are asymptomatic, testing resources can be better utilized towards individuals at risk.

Infection control practices continue to be important in the marketplace including physical distancing, masking, and good hand hygiene.

## Promoting vaccination is critically important

Vaccination is a crucial way to encourage a healthier workforce and provide greater peace of mind in the work environment. Therefore, a worksite vaccination strategy free of cost to employees is essential.

According to CVS Health vaccine tracker surveys, as of mid-Spring 2021, about half of unvaccinated individuals either do not plan to or are unsure whether they would receive a vaccine. A survey done by McKinsey showed that 45% of employees stated that initiatives targeting convenience and emphasizing that the vaccination is provided at no cost to the employee would significantly increase their likelihood of getting the vaccine.<sup>9</sup> Therefore, employers are uniquely positioned to support vaccine adoption.

**On-site vaccination clinics are an option when a sufficient number of employees to be vaccinated can be channeled to one location.**

Alternatively, employers can incentivize employees to seek out off-site vaccination at a local clinic or pharmacy, which represents a good option for smaller employers or those whose employee base may be geographically dispersed.

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**Employers are uniquely positioned to support vaccine adoption.**



**~50%**

of individuals unvaccinated by May 2021 either do not plan to or are unsure whether they would receive a vaccine

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**45%**

of employees stated that initiatives targeting convenience and obtaining the vaccine at no cost would significantly increase their likelihood of getting the vaccine



## Reaching underrepresented and underserved minorities

CVS Health is committed to reaching underrepresented and underserved communities to help ensure health equity as we work to vaccinate all Americans.

**Our presence in communities across the country uniquely positions CVS Health to educate vulnerable populations and connect them with vaccine administration services.**

Given documented racial disparities, we are focused on local education efforts driven and delivered by trusted community leaders, advocates, faith-based organizations, nonprofits, and local, community-based media. We are incorporating lessons learned from our participation in the long-term care program as vaccinators at over 40,000 long-term care facilities, and community health programs, such as **Project Health**, which offers no cost biometric screenings to help identify chronic conditions in communities nationwide.<sup>10</sup> We are demonstrating our commitment to minority communities, particularly Black, Hispanic, Native American, and Asian communities that have suffered disproportionately during the pandemic.

In February 2021 we announced the launch of a community-based strategy to address potential inequities related to COVID-19 vaccine access in communities of color, particularly in Black and Hispanic populations.

## Promoting confidence and addressing mental health

It is also critically important to ensure that employees feel secure about returning to the workplace. Communication regarding workplace safety protocols including workplace cleaning and air quality is essential to promote a sense of security about the work environment. Additionally, mental health support services such as employee assistance programs can provide resources to employees who are experiencing anxiety about the return to the workplace and can offer advice on coping with a new work environment. CVS Health offered employees expanded access to mental health services and launched new programs to promote mental health such as Here 4 U.



**Mental health support services can provide resources to employees who are experiencing anxiety about the return to the workplace.**



# A return to the workplace

Returning employees to the work environment will require monitoring of the evolving public health guidelines around the COVID-19 crisis.

A comprehensive strategy involving testing and vaccination will enable employers to feel secure in the continued health of their employees.

**Return Ready™**  
by ♥CVS Health.



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