

Virtual care plays key role in return-to-worksites plans

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One result of COVID-19 is the sudden accessibility, adoption, and embrace of virtual care and telehealth platforms. As employers begin to create their return-to-worksites plans, emphasizing the availability of cost-effective virtual care will result in a workforce that feels more confident about going back to the office.

Point to any sweeping business reform that dramatically changed the workplace, and you will quickly uncover a catalyst driving that change. The coronavirus pandemic is that catalyst for how employers and employees now look at virtual care services.

The next question employers must answer is how to implement a proper return-to-worksites strategy that addresses COVID-19, meets national, provincial, and local guidelines, protects the health concerns of employees, and builds confidence across the workforce that going back to the workplace is safe. Just consider the many questions a return-to-worksites plan must answer:

Is the physical workspace ready?

- When is it safe to bring employees back to the workplace?
- What changes will be made to cafeterias and other common spaces in the workplace to allow for social distancing?
- How much flexibility exists for employees who may be afraid to return to the worksite?
- Do employees have workplace access to personal protective equipment if needed?
- How will return-to-worksites policies be implemented across geographic locations?

What plans are in place to monitor employee health?

- What new health measures (temperature checks upon arrival and social distancing in the workplace, for example) should be in place to keep employees safe?
- Does your organization conduct on-site coronavirus tests if needed?
- How might testing help with diagnosis and evaluation of potential immunity?
- How do you determine if tests are accurate in guiding workplace decisions?

How can employees access healthcare when they need it?

- What steps should employees take if they experience symptoms or have other health concerns?
- Do they know how to access both physical and mental healthcare specialists available to them?
- How can businesses ensure HIPAA compliance with their virtual care offerings?
- What other best practices can be implemented as companies continue to learn about COVID-19?

As employers begin to implement return-to-worksite plans (after encouraging employees to work from home to stop the spread of the coronavirus), virtual care becomes the convenient, go-to option for those employees who need to connect with healthcare experts about their concerns and symptoms.

Access to virtual care enhances the workplace

Without question, virtual care quickly became an important instrument used to help manage those affected by the coronavirus. The nature of this highly infectious disease drove virtual care consultations and remote patient management to an all-time high in March and April. The continued use of virtual care in return-to-worksite efforts will help ensure health systems don't become overwhelmed and keep employees from exposing co-workers and communities to potential infection.

Frequent reminders about when and how to use virtual care have never been more important. Specify the role virtual care plays as you communicate with employees about returning to the workplace. This information will create a new level of confidence among employees to turn to their virtual care benefits when it makes sense. Beyond COVID-19 health concerns, virtual care also provides valuable support for mental health challenges faced during this difficult time. In a recent Teladoc Health study, 50% of Canadian respondents reported that their mental health had been negatively impacted by the COVID-19 pandemic. There is growing acceptance for virtual care, with 85% of respondents indicating strongly that employee benefits plans should include virtual care for mental health needs just as they do for physical health needs.

Many employers are evaluating whether to deploy sentinel surveillance strategies designed to proactively check for COVID-19 symptoms or infection, and ensure employee health and safety in the workplace. These strategies may include:

- **Temperature checks** screen employees for fever before entering the workplace, and **symptom checks** ask employees to complete a brief survey to assess whether they are experiencing common symptoms (fever, cough, shortness of breath, loss of taste or smell, etc.). It's important to understand that people may be infectious prior to experiencing symptoms, which may not appear for two to 14 days after exposure to the virus.

- **Proactive PCR (polymerase chain reaction) tests** check samples from the respiratory system (such as swabs of the inside of the nose) to tell if you're currently infected with SARS-CoV-2, the virus that causes COVID-19. Some tests are point-of-care tests, meaning results may be available at the testing site in less than one hour. Other tests must be sent to a laboratory for analysis, a process that takes one to two days once received by the lab. While some employers are considering deploying these tests proactively to identify infected employees, including those who are asymptomatic, it's important for employers to understand the limitations of this strategy. PCR tests won't always identify someone who has recently been infected because it generally takes a few days for the virus to replicate in the throat and nose, and swabs can sometimes fail to pick up signs of active infection.

(Note: Antibody tests are not a recommended sentinel surveillance strategy because they do not identify someone as being currently sick with COVID-19. These tests check your blood by looking for antibodies, which show if you had a previous infection with the virus.)

Regardless of how or if sentinel surveillance strategies are deployed, it's crucial for employers to identify ways to isolate affected employees and guide them to high-quality virtual care from their homes. In a virtual care consultation, the doctor will assess the patient's condition, answer questions, provide supportive care to alleviate symptoms, and guide the patient to diagnostic testing. In most cases, symptoms will be mild and can be safely managed with an at-home care plan. In rare cases where symptoms are more severe, the virtual care doctor can also refer the employee to the best path for in-person care. At the conclusion of a virtual care visit, the doctor can provide the employee with a medical note and/or a self-isolation note to share with his or her employer should it be medically advised to recover from home and remain away from the workplace to minimize exposure for others. As employees recover from COVID-19, virtual care offers a convenient path to reconnect with a doctor to address ongoing concerns and get answers to questions that may arise.

Your organization must safely and effectively implement a return-to-worksite strategy following this pandemic. A well-planned initiative will use virtual care to eliminate fears and create a sense of safety for all employees—enabling you to re-open the workplace with confidence.

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