Tri-County Health Department Recommendations for When Employees with COVID-19 Can Return to Work

There are three public health strategies used to determine when a person who had COVID-19 is ready to return to a workplace after being in isolation. These strategies are defined by the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) and are either a symptom-based, time-based, or test-based strategy (available at: www.cdc.gov/coronavirus/2019-ncov/hcp/disposition-in-home-patients.html).

The decision of which strategy to use is ultimately up to an employer, as TCHD does not provide individual clearance to return to work.

Isolation means separating sick individuals with COVID-19 from individuals who are not sick. A person who tests positive for COVID-19 or is suspected of having COVID-19 based on symptoms should be placed in isolation. Someone in isolation should stay home and away from others, including not going to work in an offsite location. The three strategies below define conditions for when someone can safely come out of isolation.

Symptom-based or time-based strategies: Tri-County Health Department (TCHD) and the CDC recommends that employers use one of these two strategies as the simplest way to assess when employees who had COVID-19 can return to a workplace.

Symptom-based Strategy

For persons who tested positive for COVID19 and had symptoms OR only had COVID-19 symptoms, isolation may be discontinued under these conditions:
- At least 10 days have passed since symptoms first appeared
  AND
- At least 24 hours have passed since fever resolved without using fever-reducing medication
  AND
- Symptoms have gotten better for at least 24 hours

Note that a person who is recovering from COVID-19 might have lingering symptoms after 10 or more days. As long as those symptoms have been improving for at least 24 hours and the other conditions above are met, it is safe for the person to come out of isolation.

Time-based Strategy

For persons who tested positive for COVID-19 but never had symptoms, isolation may be discontinued when:
- At least 10 days have passed since the date of their first positive COVID-19 test assuming they have not subsequently developed symptoms since their positive test. If they developed symptoms, then the symptom-based strategy should be used.

Test-based Strategy

The third option for release from isolation is a test-based strategy, which means retesting someone who previously tested positive (using a COVID-19 PCR test) to see when the test becomes negative. Repeat testing is dependent on testing being available and accessible in a particular area as well as cost (on average, COVID-19 tests cost $100-200 when not covered by insurance).

Furthermore, because COVID-19 PCR tests can remain positive long after a person is no longer infectious, TCHD and CDC do not recommend requiring proof of a negative test prior to returning to the workplace after documented COVID-19 infection. Instead, TCHD and CDC advise using either the symptom-based or time-based strategy when providing guidance to individuals on when they can return to work.

There are some situations when repeat testing might be indicated such as in certain health care settings or for persons with severe illness. Contact TCHD to discuss those circumstances.

The test-based strategy requires the person to have two follow up negative PCR tests taken at least 24 hours apart. If the person had symptoms, there should also be resolution of fever and improvement in symptoms for at least 24 hours. All test results should be final before isolation is ended.

Businesses with questions about preventing the spread of COVID-19 in the workplace should contact TCHD at 303-220-9200. For more information on COVID-19 Visit http://www.tchd.org/818/Coronavirus-COVID-19