9 Ways to Stay Safe When Returning to Your Workplace During COVID-19

By Kerri Fivecoat-Campbell | August 10, 2020

Susie Hediger, 56, who lives in Roeland Park, Kansas, worked as a cashier for a big-box lumber retailer when her governor issued a state of emergency in March due to the COVID-19 pandemic. Having been diagnosed with lung cancer in July 2019 and undergoing treatment, she wasn't sure if it was safe for her to keep going to her job.

So, she called her doctor's office for advice. "At first, they told me they thought it was safe just to wear a mask. But my oncologist called me back the following Monday and advised me to take a leave." She did, for 90 days, and then tried returning on June 16.

But most customers weren't wearing masks then and most employees weren't wearing masks properly. "They either had them on below their nose, on their chin or hanging from one ear," says Hediger. What's more, the only coronavirus protections in place were hand sanitizers and sneeze guards at the registers which didn't protect the cashiers when they had to go scan lumber.

"I lasted four hours," says Hediger. "I didn't feel safe, gave my notice and left." Teachers, of course, are dealing with this too.

Teressa, (who didn't want her last name or location used), is an elementary-school teacher expected to go back sometime after Labor Day. "I feel very comfortable returning to work," says the 59-year-old. But her husband and a sister-in-law who lives with them are high risk.

Overall Advice on Returning to Workplaces

Millions of American workers are facing similar challenges now that workplaces are opening back up. But employment advisers have suggestions on how to deal with them.

Rebecca Rogers Tijerino, president of Spherion Recruiting and Staffing, says that that while it is the employer's primary responsibility to keep employees safe, employees must also assess their situations and take action, too.

"Part of it is the employee thinking through the role you have as an employee, assessing your environment and how you can create a safe place for yourself," she says.

Dr. Teresa Bartlett, senior medical officer for Sedgwick, an insurance administrator in Troy, Mich. advising on the pandemic, says the first thing to do when evaluating returning to work is what Hediger did.

"Check with your doctor and make sure it's a safe environment based on your health, as well as assessing the location. If you're in a COVID-19 hot spot, you may not want to go back," says Bartlett.

9 Tips to Stay Safe

Once you have clearance from your doctor, experts offer these tips to help stay safe when returning to work:

1. See what protections your employer has in place. "For example, what are the cleaning protocols?" says Bartlett. "Is there hand sanitizer and social distancing rules in place? And are there PPEs [personal protective equipment], such as masks, available?"

2. Avoid commuting with others and check into the safety of public transportation. "Commuting together automatically puts people in close distance to each other," says Bartlett. "I would recommend, if you can, to quit this for now."

Bartlett adds if you can't, then only commute with people you live with, people who have been recently tested for the virus and those who share your same values with regards to social distancing and mask wearing.

Or consider public transportation — if that's a safe option. Bartlett says many cities have closed off seats on trains and buses so people sit at least six feet apart. And they've often adopted strict sanitizing and mask-wearing protocols.

Still, to protect yourself further while taking public transit, Bartlett advises bringing along hand sanitizer or wipes, wiping down surfaces you must touch and remembering to keep your hands off your face.

3. Practice social distancing at work. The Centers for Disease Control recommends staying at least six feet from others and wearing a mask and/or a Plexiglass face shield.

"You can even ask your employer to put [Plexiglass] at the top of your corporate cubicle if you have to sit next to people," says Tijerino. "I also recommend flex schedules, if possible, so there aren't people sitting too close to one another, as well as entering the workplace and exiting at the same time."

4. Stay off crowded elevators: Tijerino says if you work in a building with elevators, take the stairs, if you can. "If not, simply ask people if they can wait for the next one, if you feel vulnerable," she adds.

Bartlett advises not to get on an elevator with more than five people. "Even that's a lot," she notes.

5. Clean and sanitize your workspace. Tijerino advises to make sure you have sanitizer and cleaning supplies at your desk or workstation. And avoid touching handrails and other surfaces when possible.

"When you do touch door handles, elevator buttons or other things, make sure to sanitize and then wash your hands as soon as you are able," Tijerino says.

6. Watch out for the break areas. Hediger says the final straw on her last day of work: the company had no rules for the common break room. It left all the chairs and tables in place and didn't require masks there.

Says Bartlett: "We've gone to great lengths in the medical field to emphasize that common coffeepot handles should be washed and sanitized after each use and you should wash your hands when handling a common coffeepot. But I think many employers are missing the mark on break rooms, and they're even more dangerous because you can't wear a mask while eating."

Bartlett recommends six-foot distancing, emphasizing that sitting across from someone at a table is actually only about three feet. Also, remember to wipe off surfaces, refrigerator and sink handles, microwave buttons and other commonly touched surfaces before using them.

7. Wash your clothes and masks every day after coming home from work. That's smart COVID-19 protection, Tijerino says.

8. Ask your co-workers for cooperation. Tijerino recommends inviting them to tell you if you're doing something — maybe unconsciously, such as touching your face — that isn't safe.

"This will make them feel comfortable in inviting you to do the same and create a team environment in helping each other stay safe," she notes.

9. Speak to your employer about any concerns you have. Tijerino says that if you see something making you feel unsafe, speak to your supervisor and politely offer suggestions.

Use a nonconfrontational preface to indicate your intent. For example, open your safety suggestions or concerns with a statement like: "I'm grateful that our company has been so invested in ensuring that we all work safely, I've noticed that…" Or "I've been thinking about… and I thought we all might benefit from…"

Include not just your personal concern, but suggestions or recommendations for everyone in your workplace.

While there's a risk that raising your worries could be held against you by your employer, there's also the chance that positively presenting ideas and recommendations will be recognized with growth opportunities such as new assignments, promotion and wage or salary increases.

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