NEWS BRIEF

Coronavirus in the UK

Wearing Facial Masks or Coverings in the Workplace During COVID-19

During the COVID-19 pandemic, some employers have remained open as essential businesses. Following the new rules announced by the Government on 10th May, many other organisations plan to welcome back their employees to the workplace. One of the new rules introduced is to wear face masks or coverings in public, including places of employment as recommended by health experts.

There are many questions about the differences between masks and face coverings, and which is appropriate to wear. By familiarising yourself with best practices related to masks and face coverings in the workplace, employers can help prevent the spread of COVID-19.

What Is Considered a Mask or Face Covering?

Employers should know that masks and face coverings are different and should be used by different types of professions in the workplace.

Face Coverings

According to health experts, a cloth face covering can help prevent the spread of COVID-19. A face covering refers to a cloth covering of the face and is not a medical-grade mask. These can be purchased or even made at home. Face coverings will be an appropriate protection for employers to consider in many industries.

Masks

Masks refer to filtering respirators, such as a medical-grade or surgical mask. These are currently being utilised by vital professions, such as health care. Due to the COVID-19 pandemic, masks are in short supply, and governments and health organisations across the globe are currently designating these as critical supplies.

Should My Organisation Use Face Coverings or Masks?

Organisations should consider what types of services they provide and review government guidance. While masks can help prevent the spread of COVID-19, health organisations consider these as critical supplies that must continue to be reserved for health care workers and other medical first responders. Unless providing critical services in one of these professions, most employers should consider using cloth face coverings rather than masks.

Before making any determinations, employers need to review updated guidelines from the UK Government; https://www.gov.uk/guidance/working-safely-during-coronavirus-covid-19/offices-and-contact-centres

Further, keep in mind that HSE regulations require employers to provide any necessary personal protective equipment or clothing; such as face coverings or masks to their employees free of charge.

Face Coverings in the Workplace

Studies show that people with minimal or no symptoms can still have COVID-19. According to health experts, while wearing face coverings shouldn't replace social distancing, cloth face coverings can help prevent the transmission of COVID-19.

Health experts currently recommend wearing face coverings in public. Effective cloth face coverings should possess the following characteristics:

- A tight fit but comfortable on the face, allowing for breathing without restriction

- Secured with ties or ear loops

- Includes multiple layers of durable fabric, able to withstand washing for reuse

- Allows for breathing without restriction

General best practices for implementing face coverings in the workplace include:

- Create specific policies. Employers should have policies and practices in place for use of face coverings. Topics to cover may include:

  o Who is expected to wear face coverings

  o How face coverings will be supplied

  o Using face coverings correctly

- Employers will also want to plan for unique situations, including:

  o An employee who objects to wearing a face covering

  o An employee who loses his or her face covering

  o An employee who is unable to wear face coverings due to a medical condition

  o An employee who would prefer to wear their own face covering, if the employer will be providing them

Communicate expectations to all employees.

Employers should communicate policy updates related to face coverings to all employees. This may include posting notices, as well as training employees on best practices. Communications should cover topics such as whether face coverings are optional or mandatory, who will be providing them and how they will be washed, and how training will be conducted.

Ensure face coverings are washed daily. According to health experts, washing face coverings in a washing machine should properly clean it.

Effective practices can ensure that face coverings are being used effectively and that employers can plan for how to introduce face coverings in the workplace. Many health experts suggest that COVID-19 may even come back in additional waves, and employers may end up utilising COVID-19 related business practices into the near future. When implementing face coverings in the workplace, employers should review government guidelines, and consult a legal professional when making any policies or changes.

Training Employees on Properly Wearing Face Coverings

To ensure the best use of face coverings in the workplace, employers may want to consider a training programme for employees. Training dialogue may include the following best practices:

- Before entering the workplace, ensure your cloth face covering is snug and secure, and is secured with ties or ear loops. Make sure you are able to breathe comfortably and without restriction.

- Remember—wearing a cloth face covering does not replace COVID-19 best practices, such as washing hands often, maintaining social distancing of 2 metres or more and avoiding touching of the face.

- When it is time to take off a face covering, avoid touching hands to your face, nose and mouth. As soon as the face covering has been removed, make sure to wash your hands immediately.

- Cloth face coverings should be washed in a washing machine between uses.

Masks in the Workplace

Along with face coverings, masks can help prevent the spread of COVID-19. For appropriate employers, such as organisations that employ health care workers and other medical first responders, medical-grade masks may be appropriate rather than face coverings. Though masks are not new to professions such as health care, employers should ensure that all employees are aware of any updates and the current Government rules.

General best practices for implementing masks in the workplace include:

- Ensuring an appropriate supply of masks. Employers will want to consider policies for how to most efficiently use masks.

- Create specific policies. Employers should have policies and practices in place for use of masks. Topics to cover may include:

  o Who is expected to wear masks

  o Using masks correctly

  o Expectations of the number of masks used per shift

  o Disposal expectations

- o Reuse expectations, if applicable

- Employers will also want to plan for unique situations, including:

  - o An employee who objects to wearing a mask

  - o An employee who loses his or her mask, and has surpassed guidelines for using a certain number of masks per shift

  - o An employee who is unable to wear a mask due to a medical condition

- Communicate expectations to all employees. Employers should communicate policy updates related to masks to all employees. This may include posting notices, as well as training employees on best practices. Communications should cover topics such as whether masks are optional or mandatory, who will be providing them and how training will be conducted.

When implementing masks in the workplace, employers should review government guidelines and consult a legal professional when making any policies or changes.

Training Employees on Properly Wearing Masks

To ensure best use of masks in the workplace, employers may want to consider a training programme for employees. Training dialogue may include the following best practices:

- Before entering the workplace, ensure your mask is snug and secure, and you are able to breathe comfortably and without restriction.

- Remember—wearing a mask does not replace COVID-19 best practices, such as washing hands often, maintaining social distancing of 2 metres or more and avoiding touching of the face.

- When it is time to take off a mask, avoid touching your hands to your face, nose and mouth. As soon as the mask has been removed, make sure to wash your hands immediately.

Protecting the Safety and Health of Employees

As employers plan for how to operate both during and post-coronavirus, creating preventive best practices can set up organisations for success. By being proactive and establishing appropriate measures and practices, employers can not only help prevent the spreading of diseases—but put employees at ease that necessary steps are being taken to ensure the health and safety of those who will be spending time in the workplace.

As guidelines related to COVID-19 change, employers should consult with a legal professional when updating or changing workplace policies. As you consider planning for your organisation in the wake of the pandemic, us today for additional COVID-19 related resources.