



COVID-19: Phased Reopening During the COVID-19 Emergency Frequently Asked Questions

This document is intended to provide answers to frequently asked questions (FAQ) around the initial, phased reopening of the New York City (NYC) Department of Health and Mental Hygiene (DOHMH) with the lifting of New York State (NYS) on Pause. Due to the dynamic nature of the COVID-19 emergency and response, modifications and adjustments may be made.

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General

Please refer to [What New Yorkers Need to Know Now About COVID-19](#) for answers to many frequently asked questions about COVID-19. Visit DOHMH's COVID-19 webpage at nyc.gov/health/coronavirus for up-to-date information and guidance about COVID-19, and nyc.gov/coronavirus for other NYC resources.

Daily Self-Check

Q: What should staff do before going to work?

A: On a daily basis, staff will be required to complete a mandatory health screening before coming to work (or at the time of entry). Those who do not meet screening requirements should not come to work (or should return home) and notify their supervisor. The supervisor in turn should notify their Designated Human Resources Liaison (DHRL) and have this reported to HRHotline@health.nyc.gov. Staff should follow up with their health care provider and observe all guidance to prevent the spread of COVID-19 to others.

Sick at Work

Q: If a staff member is at work and reports having COVID-19 symptoms (that are not due to a preexisting health condition), what should their supervisor do and who should the staff notify?

A: Supervisors should instruct staff working on-site to go home immediately if sick or, if the staff member is teleworking, to remain home. The supervisor should notify their Designated Human Resources Liaison (DHRL) and have this reported to HRHotline@health.nyc.gov. Staff should follow up with their health care provider and observe all guidance to prevent the spread of COVID-19 to others.

Supervisors should support any staff impacted by COVID-19 and advise them to follow current recommendations and the advice of their health care provider. Employees can receive excused leave in keeping with the [Updated Guidance for City Agencies on Leave Policy Applicable During the Outbreak of Coronavirus Disease 2019 \(COVID-19\), effective June 3, 2020](#).

Safe Practices

Q: What can staff do to contribute to safety at work?

A: Staff play an essential role in stopping the spread of COVID-19. Staff should:

- Monitor their health daily and before each shift
- Stay home if sick
- Wear face coverings (see [Face Coverings](#) section, below)
- Keep at least 6 feet of distance from others whenever possible

- Wash their hands often with soap and water for at least 20 seconds or use an alcoholbased hand sanitizer if soap and water are not available
- Cover their coughs and sneezes with a tissue or sleeve (not their bare hands)
- Avoid touching their eyes, nose or mouth, with unwashed hands
- Not shake hands
- Avoid close contact with people who are sick

Q: What role are managers and supervisors expected to play?

A: Managers and supervisors are responsible for monitoring their work areas and units and for communicating physical distancing and face covering needs. Guidance will be provided to help managers and supervisors in this important role.

Flexible Work Schedules

Q. What is being done to accommodate flexible work schedules?

A: Managers should ascertain whether staff members need flexibility in their work schedules (for example, different start times and/or designated work-from-home days) to maintain their health, safety and productivity. Delays due to transportation should be factored in as well. Managers should work with staff in setting schedules within the limits set by the needs of the program and in keeping with City and agency policies around time and attendance. Supervisors should communicate their expectations for employees who will be allowed flexible work schedules.

Physical (or Social) Distancing

Q: What role do staff play in physical distancing?

A: Physical distancing is needed to stop the spread of COVID-19 and to protect staff, clients and our communities. All staff must carefully observe 6 feet physical distancing (including, where present, floor or wall marker designations), and the requirement to wear a face covering in common areas, such as lobbies, hallways and elevators.

Q: Are alternative seating arrangements being considered to ensure physical distancing?

A: Yes, space planning solutions are being actively explored, with the goal of maintaining at least 6 feet between staff. We will limit space occupancy in the initial stages of reopening and monitor space usage as more people return to working on-site. We will consider staggered shifts and a combination of teleworking and on-site work to limit the number of people at work sites.

Q: What other physical distancing measures will be in place at DOHMH facilities?

A: The following are being considered:

- Using every other desk or diagonal workstations in tandem with continued teleworking whenever possible
- Using signage and markers to provide visual cues of physical distancing
- Posting guidelines for elevators
- Designating stairs as one-way for routine use (would not apply in an emergency), where feasible
- Using signs in conference rooms to remind people to stay 6 feet apart and the maximum occupancy for each room
- Temporarily closing nonessential common areas
- For rooms with two doors, designating an “entry” door and an “exit” door • Disabling DCD (time clocks) for the foreseeable future

Q: Where can supervisors and managers find posters and flyers?

A: Poster and flyers can be downloaded from [the agency’s COVID-19: Posters and Flyers](#) webpage.

Elevators and Stairs

Q: Are there guidelines around the use of elevators?

A: All elevator riders should wear a face covering and, where posted, abide by revised elevator capacity limits to limit the number of people per elevator. People should keep 6 feet of distance while approaching and leaving elevator banks and waiting for elevators.

Q: Can doors in enclosed stairwells be propped open to avoid touching handles?

A: No. Fire doors in enclosed stairwells cannot be left open due to fire code regulations.

Restrooms

Q: What are the guidelines around use of restrooms?

A: Always wear a face covering while walking to and from the restroom and while inside the restroom. If a restroom is too crowded, wait outside the door or use a restroom on another floor. If restroom fixtures (such as sinks) are marked off to support physical distancing, please observe these restrictions. Be courteous and limit your time in the restroom to allow others to use the restroom.

Meetings

Q: What is the general guidance around in-person meetings?

A: Until further notice, in-person meetings should be avoided. Continue to use teleconferencing and videoconferencing (for example, Skype for Business, Microsoft Teams), email or phone — even when people are physically in the same building.

Q: Can in-person meetings be held?

A: While in-person meetings are discouraged, there may be instances where in-person meetings are necessary. In these cases:

- Observe **new meeting room occupancy limits** noted in Microsoft Outlook’s Meeting Planner/Archibus, which have been modified to reflect physical distancing requirements. For meeting rooms not in Meeting Planner/Archibus, ensure occupancy does not exceed 50% of the maximum capacity of the space.
- Meetings should occur in a well-ventilated conference room or other space (for example, in a room where air is supplied via a central system or have operable windows) and large enough to allow at least 6 feet of distance between attendees.
- Ensure that 6 feet of distance is maintained between meeting attendees; stagger seating as needed and limit meeting length whenever possible.
- Attendees must wear a face covering at all times, unless all attendees are seated and able to stay 6 feet apart.

Whenever possible, opt to schedule a conference call or videoconference.

Pantries and Other Break Areas

Q: How can we reduce crowding in pantries and other break areas?

A: Managers should speak with staff about staggering breaks and use of pantries and other break areas at mealtimes, whenever possible. Staff should maintain at least 6 feet of distance from others and return to the pantry at a later time if it is too crowded.

At Gotham (42-09 28th Street in Long Island City) and certain other buildings, pantry seating will be removed. Also, at Gotham, seating will be removed from the Mama Bite cafeteria space. At this time, staff should eat at their own workstations. Staff should ensure that they clean their areas appropriately and throw out garbage promptly in appropriate receptacles.

Q: Will pantry appliances be available for staff to use?

A: Yes. To ensure the safety of all, staff should wash their hands before and after use of appliances.

Cleaning and Disinfection

Q: What cleaning and disinfection measures will be in place when staff return to work sites?

A: Preoccupancy cleaning will take place prior to phased reopening. More generally, DOHMH will institute frequent cleaning and disinfection of high-touch surfaces throughout facilities. These include restrooms, elevator buttons, door handles and other frequently touched surfaces. For information about the cleaning and disinfection provisions that DOHMH will follow, see [General Guidance for Cleaning and Disinfection for Non-Health Care Settings](#).

Q: Will cleaning supplies be available to staff to allow for routine cleaning of workstations and common areas?

A: Yes. Staff will play an important role in helping to maintain a clean workplace to reduce the risk of COVID-19 transmission. DOHMH will ensure adequate supplies of soap in restrooms and pantry areas and hand sanitizer and disinfecting wipes (or cleaning supplies) will be provided for staff use. Staff should not take their own cleaning supplies with them to the office unless the Office of Occupational Safety and Health (OS&H), safety@health.nyc.gov, has been consulted and provided written approval (note, however, that approval can be revoked at any time).

Note: Aerosol disinfecting sprays, such as Lysol Disinfectant spray, should not be used by staff as others in the area may have fragrance sensitivity that can cause irritation or severe allergic reactions.

Please do not remove or stockpile hand sanitizer or disinfecting wipes provided for use at the office.

Hand Sanitizer

Q: How do you properly use hand sanitizer?

A: To properly use hand sanitizer, follow these basic instructions:

- Place a dime-size amount in the palm of one hand.
- Rub your hands together and cover your entire hand, including your wrist and between your fingers.
- Keep rubbing your hands until skin is dry.

Face Coverings and Personal Protective Equipment (PPE)

Q: Where can staff get general information about face coverings, including proper face covering use and care?

A: Refer to DOHMH's [COVID-19 Face Coverings: Frequently Asked Questions](#).

Q: What is the purpose of face coverings?

A: A face covering decreases the chance of spreading COVID-19. Face coverings are especially important because people can have COVID-19 and not know it because they do not have

symptoms. Even when wearing a face covering, it is important to maintain 6 feet of distance from others whenever possible.

Q: When and where are face coverings needed?

A: Staff should always wear face coverings in common areas (such as lobbies, elevators, stairwells, hallways, pantries, break rooms and restrooms) and whenever a distance of 6 feet or more cannot be reasonably maintained. This means that staff should wear a face covering while walking within a facility or interacting in-person with others. Staff are not required to wear a face covering while at their desk if no one is within 6 feet. Meeting attendees do not need to wear a face covering in conference rooms if at least 6 feet of distance is maintained and all attendees are seated. See [Meetings](#) section above for additional information on in-person meetings.

***Note for staff working in the Bureau of the Public Health Laboratory (PHL):** Provided **face shields (not surgical masks or cloth face coverings)** should be worn in laboratory areas when there is a reasonable likelihood of being within 6 feet of another person. N95 masks and other PPE should only be worn as required by standard procedures to perform laboratory activities.

Q: Who is handling face covering distribution to program staff?

A: Each program's [Designated Human Resources Liaison \(DHRL\)](#) has identified face covering supply needs and will handle distribution. Managers are expected to account for the needs of staff returning to the work site and to reach out to their DHRL to ensure proper distribution.

Q: Can staff use their own face covering?

A: Yes. While we recommend agency-distributed face coverings, staff may use their own face coverings (including cloth face coverings), but must abide by the agency's [Dress Code Policy](#) related to statements, pictures or logos.

Note: A face covering with an exhalation valve is **not** permitted, as it allows unfiltered exhaled air to escape to others. An exhalation valve is a plastic piece embedded in the face covering/mask. It acts as a one-way valve that closes when you breathe in, but opens when you breathe out, expelling air from the face covering.

Q: What if an employee cannot medically tolerate wearing a face covering?

A: Employees who cannot medically tolerate wearing a face covering can seek a reasonable accommodation by contacting the EEO Office at EEOTeam@health.nyc.gov or by calling 646-

940-0628, 347-396-6508, 347-396-6507 or 347-396-6466. Emails are preferred for recordkeeping purposes.

Q: Do staff need to wear face masks, N95s and other PPE because of COVID-19?

A: In general, no special PPE other than a face covering is needed. However, some staff may be required to use a face mask or an N95 respirator depending on the type of job activity or location per their program's protocol, and for reasons that may or may not relate to COVID-19. If so, staff should use face masks or N95 respirators as required by protocol.

Q: Should gloves be used to protect against COVID-19?

A: No. Routine glove use is not recommended. In general, gloves are appropriate when cleaning with disinfectants or caring for someone who is sick.

***Note for staff working in the Bureau of PHL:** Gloves are not allowed outside labs except where the job function requires it.

The best way to protect oneself is to wash hands regularly with soap and water for 20 seconds or use an alcohol-based hand sanitizer with at least 60% alcohol if soap and water is not available.

Concerns with glove use include the following:

- Using gloves can provide a false sense of security and studies have shown that most people who routinely use gloves remove them incorrectly or do not clean their hands after removing them and their hands picked up germs anyway. A [2019 study in the American Journal of Infection Control](#) found that in simulations, 37% of health care workers using their normal glove removal technique contaminated their skin in the process.
- Gloves can be a source of contamination. If a wearer touches surfaces during the day while wearing the same pair of gloves, dirt and germs can be transmitted from one surface to another.
- Wearing gloves prevents a person from being able to clean their hands often, which is the most important hygiene action to prevent the spread of COVID-19.

For more information, see the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention's webpage [When to Wear Gloves](#).

COVID-19 Testing

Q: Where can staff learn more about COVID-19 testing?

A: Refer to DOHMH's [COVID-19 Testing: Frequently Asked Questions \(FAQ\)](#) about coronavirus and antibody testing.

Q: Will COVID-19 testing be offered to staff through the agency?

A: At this time, there are no plans to offer workplace-based COVID-19 testing to staff. NYC has many testing sites. Go to nyc.gov/covidtest to find a testing site; many of the sites listed are free.

Q: Will antibody test results be required to determine if someone can return to work?

A: No. At this time, antibody tests for COVID-19 cannot be used to detect whether someone is currently sick or infected. It is also not yet known whether a positive antibody test means that someone is protected from getting COVID-19 again. Antibody tests should not be used to decide whether someone should or should not work.

Visitor Restrictions

Q: Are there general guidelines around visitor restrictions?

A: Whenever possible, programs that have visitors should have an “appointment only” schedule to limit occupancy and control flow. Visitor access should be limited by encouraging web-based services for clients or video and phone meetings. Only business-critical visitors should arrive onsite; to the extent possible, visitors should be told prior to their scheduled visit not to come if sick (meaning they have COVID-19 symptoms) and that they will go through health screening prior to entry. Staff should instruct visitors to wear a face covering while in the building.

Q: What if a visitor does not have a face covering?

A: Visitors should be provided with a face covering if they do not have one.

Q: What are things you can do if a member of the public enters a public-facing area without a face covering?

A: You must decline entry to someone who refuses to wear a face covering. However, if the individual states that they cannot wear a face covering because they have a disability or a medical condition, you must discuss with the individual whether there is a way you can provide a reasonable accommodation that will not cause an undue hardship as described below.

Q: What if a member of the public says they have a medical reason or disability for not wearing a face covering?

A: Where a member of the public declines to wear a face covering due to a medical condition or disability, you cannot require the individual to provide medical documentation verifying the

health issue. In addition, you must discuss with the individual whether there is a way that you can provide a reasonable accommodation that will not cause an undue hardship. You should try to provide alternative arrangements that are workable for your program and for other members of the public who may be in the same space awaiting to be serviced. These arrangements will vary considerably based on your program's ability to make accommodations without creating a hardship upon your program's ability to function.

Depending on staffing and the layout of the physical space where service is provided to the public, and available supplies, some accommodations that may be reasonable and not cause undue hardship include the following:

- Offer the use of a clear face shield in lieu of a face covering.
- Where possible, provide service while keeping a physical distance of at least 6 feet.

If you have any questions, please contact the EEO Office at EEOTeam@health.nyc.gov or by calling 646-940-0628, 347-396-6508, 347-396-6507 or 347-396-6466. Please also contact the EEO Office for guidance if a member of the public indicates a medical reason for not wearing a face covering but refuses to accept a reasonable accommodation or to engage in a dialogue.

Public Transportation

Q: What considerations should staff take when using public transportation?

A: Staff should practice the following safety precautions when using public transportation:

- Practice physical distancing whenever possible.
- Wear a face covering at all times, including in for-hire vehicles such as taxis (a NYS Executive Order requires use of face coverings on all public transportation).
- While waiting for a subway, ferry or bus, be mindful of other passengers and keep as far apart as possible.
- Wait for the next subway or bus if it is too crowded, and, if possible, ride before or after peak commuting hours.
- Use hand sanitizer after leaving public transportation and wash hands with soap and water upon arriving at work.
- Whenever possible, consider other forms of commuting, including biking (with a helmet) and walking.

See the Metropolitan Transportation Authority reopening webpage at new.mta.info/coronavirus/reopening-plan for information about their reopening plan.

Mental Health: Stress and Support for Staff

Q: What resources are available to support staff members' mental health during the COVID19 emergency?

A: Staff may find the following resources helpful:

- DOHMH's [Worksite Wellness](#) webpage

- DOHMH's [COVID-19: Coping and Emotional Well-Being](#) webpage
- Find emotional support through:
- NYC Well, a confidential 24/7 helpline staffed by trained counselors who can provide brief counseling and referrals to care in over 200 languages. For assistance, call 888-NYC-WELL (888-692-9355), text "WELL" to 65173 or chat at nyc.gov/nycwell. NYC Well's website offers a number of well-being and emotional support applications ([apps](#)). Visit nyc.gov/nycwell and click on **App Library**.
- NYS COVID-19 Emotional Support Helpline at 844-863-9314, staffed from 8 a.m. to 10 p.m., seven days a week, with specially trained volunteer professionals who are there to listen, support and refer if needed.
- The [NYC Employee Assistance Program \(EAP\)](#), which offers free and confidential assistance to employees and family members and can be reached at 212-306-7660 or by email at eap@olr.nyc.gov.

Q: If staff are stressed about returning to work, is there someone they can talk to for support?

A: Dealing with change is hard. Staff should let their supervisor know they are feeling stressed and talk about ways to make the transition easier and more comfortable. If employees need emotional support, they can contact the [NYC EAP](#). They are now offering extended hours (8 a.m. to 11 p.m., Monday through Friday) by phone, text or video calls at eap@olr.nyc.gov or 212-306-7660. The above-listed resources can also be utilized for support.

Q: I am grieving the loss of a loved one. Are there resources available?

A: DOHMH has guidance about [grieving the loss of a loved one](#) as well as [workplace grief](#). Many providers are offering bereavement services by phone or chat, and faith-based community groups may have online services and support. The above-listed resources can also be utilized for support.

Q: I am feeling disconnected from my colleagues with all the physical distancing measures. How can we stay more connected?

A: Take a break together and chat by phone or video and try to have a staff meeting using a video platform. For information about staying connected outside of work, see DOHMH's [COVID19: Staying Connected With Friends and Family](#) handout.

Q: How can staff help coworkers who may be struggling?

A: For colleagues in need, share DOHMH's [Coping With Stress and Social Distancing During the COVID-19 Outbreak](#) or connect them to the [NYC EAP](#) or [NYC Well](#).

If a staff member knows someone who may be thinking about suicide, they can learn the warning signs, listen to them, talk about it, suggest they seek professional mental health support, and help them connect to support through [NYC EAP](#) or [NYC Well](#). See DOHMH's [Coping With Thoughts of Suicide During the COVID-19 Pandemic](#).

Reasonable Accommodations

Q: What is a reasonable accommodation?

A: A reasonable accommodation is any change to the application or hiring process, a job, the way a job is done or the work environment that allows a person who is qualified for a job to perform the essential functions of that job and enjoy equal employment opportunities.

Q: When should an employee request a reasonable accommodation?

A: Employees can request a reasonable accommodation if they need a change or adjustment in their job functions because of a disability (including an underlying medical condition related to COVID-19), pregnancy or pregnancy-related medical condition, domestic violence or stalking, or to enable religious observance.

Q: Who should an employee contact to request a reasonable accommodation?

A: Employees should contact the Equal Employment Opportunity (EEO) office at EEOTeam@health.nyc.gov or by calling 646-940-0628, 347-396-6508, 347-396-6507 or 347-396-6466. Emails are preferred for record-keeping purposes.

Q: What will employees need in order to apply for a reasonable accommodation?

A: The EEO office will inform of the necessary documents depending on the type of request. Reasonable accommodations can take up to 30 days to process, depending on circumstances.

Q: Will an employee's information be kept confidential?

A: Yes, all correspondence with the EEO office is confidential. In addition, the EEO office will not disclose the employee's medical information to the employee's program.

DOHMH may change recommendations as the situation evolves.

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