



Chippewa County Department of Public Health

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www.co.chippewa.wi.us/ccdph



To: Chippewa County Businesses
From: Angela Weideman, Health Officer/Director
Date: July 10, 2020
Re: Increase in COVID-19 Cases and Close Contacts related to Breakrooms and other Communal Spaces

Employers commonly offer a space for their employees to take meal and rest breaks and may offer amenities such as a refrigerator, microwave, and communal utensils, plates and glasses for employee use. Recently, Chippewa County Department of Public (CCDPH) has seen an increase in COVID-19 cases and close contacts associated with lack of physical distancing at work, specifically in break rooms and other communal spaces.

CCDPH understands and appreciates that people miss their coworkers and that they want to eat meals with them again. Seeing the people that we enjoy spending time with is important for our mental health. However, our physical health is important too.

Because of the increased potential for transmission, employers should seriously consider taking the following steps:

- **Encourage employees to stay home if they are sick.**
- **Encourage employees not to eat around others, whether on or off premises.** Employees could try setting up a virtual lunch meeting, so they still can connect with their coworkers while maintaining physical distance.
- **Eliminate any communal food and limit or eliminate food-based celebrations.** Any food or beverages provided by the employer should be removed from meal and break areas, or placed in workstations or distributed individually to limit contact.
- **Consider temporarily closing vending areas.** If vending machines are used, make disinfecting wipes, hand sanitizer, or other protective measures available to employees when using machines. Be sure to post signs about proper hand hygiene after utilizing vending machines.
- **Closing common areas such as meal and break rooms** to avoid transmission of COVID-19 between employees. Where kitchens and break rooms are closed, employers may implement a brown bag meal program and encourage employees to bring refrigerated lunchboxes or coolers for food and beverage storage.
- **Ensure that employees can maintain a distance of at least six feet from others and wear masks.** If a food preparation or other common eating area must remain open, employers should take steps to limit their risk of exposure:
 - **Encourage the use of outdoor seating areas** and physical distancing for any small group activities such as lunches, breaks, and meetings.
 - **Consider removing tables and chairs from seating areas** to ensure proper physical distancing between employees eating meals or taking breaks.
 - **Consider installing dividers and barricades** where adequate distancing space is not otherwise available, to limit the spread of COVID-19.
 - **Use signs, tape marks, or other visual cues** such as decals or colored tape on the floor, placed 6 feet apart, to indicate where to stand when physical barriers are not possible.

“The Healthiest County to Live, Learn, Work, and Play”



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- **Replace high-touch communal items**, such as coffee pots and bulk snacks, with alternatives such as pre-packaged, single-serving items.
- **Stagger rest breaks and meal periods** to limit employee interactions and allow for the greatest distance between employees who are eating or resting. Where more than one kitchen or break room is available, the employer should evaluate whether assigning a portion of the workforce to use each space is feasible, as this may further limit any spread between employees.
- **Purchase additional refrigerators and microwaves, or add handwashing or hand sanitizer stations** to avoid congregation of employees in communal areas.
- **Advise employees about proper hand and kitchen hygiene**, including washing their hands before handling and consuming food, wiping down counters, tables, and chairs after use, and not sharing food with others.
- **Ensure that all communal spaces are thoroughly cleaned before employees return, and are frequently deep cleaned during the day.** Consider visibly posting the last time communal areas were cleaned.
- **Consider applying this guidance to other shared spaces** such as a supply closet, library, lactation space, locker room, or conference room.

While public health experts and frontline workers are working hard to prepare for additional surges, employers can also help slow the spread of the virus by taking precautions in the workplace. Because COVID-19 is a new virus, we are still learning how it spreads and how it works. Until there is a vaccine, the best thing to do is to adopt proactive public health measures as we get back to our Wisconsin way of life. The actions we take now will allow us to manage outbreaks and community spread in the future. See [CCDPH's Business Toolkit](#) for additional strategies and tools employers can use to minimize risk in their workplaces.