



Risk Control

Re-entering the workplace after a shutdown: Guidance for employers

Return-to-work best practices after an extended leave

During a disaster or other emergency event, businesses may elect – or be required – to shut down. When returning to work, certain steps should be taken during re-entry to ensure a safe workplace for employees. This guide will help identify some key activities employers should consider for a safer return to work.

Refresher Safety Training

Returning to work after an extended break in employment should be well-planned and safely executed. One key aspect for return to work should be refresher safety-related training. A refresher safety orientation should be provided for all employees who have been off work for more than two weeks, to reiterate key safety protocols. Employers should plan on providing an overall safety refresher to all employees, plus training on critical topics relevant to their industry such as:

- Incident reporting procedures
- Emergency response plan and procedures
- Employee role-based training on environmental health and safety topics including Lock Out/Tag Out, Machine Safety, Powered Industrial Vehicle operations, chemical handling and exposure, safe driving, and respirator use and storage

Review of Job Hazard/Safety Analysis

Before restarting work, employees and managers should review the job hazard analysis and best practices for relevant job tasks. Additionally, consider reviewing motor vehicle operation policies and procedures before allowing employees to operate them.

Based on the job hazard analysis, reconfirm the appropriate personal protective equipment (PPE) required for performing the task. Ensure employees have adequate PPE to perform their tasks and are familiar

with usage procedures. Managers and supervisors should review the existing inventory of PPE. Depending on inventory, establish a plan for replenishing and stocking essential PPE.

Workflow and Process Planning

As part of the return-to-work process for employees, area managers should review the existing standard operating procedures (SOP) for accuracy. The employee should be instructed to review the task-specific SOP before restarting, to help with task recall and a smoother transition back to work.

Also, consider reviewing the workflow before the restart to identify any redundant work steps. Employers should look for opportunities to enhance processes by reducing non-value-added motion. This can help improve overall efficiency, productivity and quality.

Physical Reconditioning

When employees performing physically demanding work tasks are away from work for an extended period due to an injury or other event, there may be a reduction in the amount of physical activity they perform. This can result in physical deconditioning, which may:

- Reduce muscle strength
- Reduce aerobic capacity and physical endurance



A reduction in muscle strength and physical endurance can result in an earlier onset of fatigue and increase the risk of musculoskeletal disorders (MSDs). To counter some of these effects, employers should consider a gradual return to work. Consider implementing the below strategies:

- Gradually ramp up to a full shift for employees who perform physically demanding work tasks.
- Encourage employees to take all available breaks. This will help with muscle recovery and fatigue reduction.
- Employers may have an active stretching program in place. Prior to employees restarting the program, it should be reviewed by a professional who helped develop it. This will determine if any modifications need to be made to accommodate for physical deconditioning.

Heat Acclimatization

After an extended absence, employees will need time to adjust to the elevated temperatures found in some workplaces. This can occur in both indoor and outdoor work environments.

In their 2020 TLVs and BEIs book, The American Conference of Governmental Industrial Hygienists (ACGIH) notes that a noticeable loss of heat acclimatization begins after four days and could be completely lost after three to four weeks.

The American Industrial Hygiene Association’s “The Occupational Environment; Its Evaluation, Control, and Management, 3rd edition,” offers the following guidelines on how to ease back into a hot environment:

Absence	Work Days (% of full work assignment)			
	1st	2nd	3rd	4th
>20 days	50%	60%	80%	100%

If employees are wearing impermeable protective clothing or other PPE, the time to reacclimatize may be greater.

If a heat exposure control program is not already in place, one should be developed. The Occupational Safety and Health Administration (OSHA) has outlined key considerations on its [Occupational Exposure to Heat](#) page.

Cold Acclimatization

Although acclimatization does not have as much of an impact with cold exposures as with heat, the readjustment to a cold environment also needs to be considered. A gradual reintroduction to the cold environment should be followed.

The cold stress prevention procedures that were in place prior to the shutdown should be reviewed and reinforced with the returning employees. Clothing should be reviewed and confirmation made that all employees have the required protective layers. The 2020 ACGIH TLVs and BEIs book points out that employees should adjust their clothing according to their personal comfort needs. If one standard clothing set is prescribed for all employees, some may be hot while others might be cold.

OSHA’s [Cold Stress Quick Card](#) and [Cold Preparedness Guide](#) can provide details for an overall Cold Stress program.

Respirator Fit Testing

Following an extended leave, proper respirator use, care and maintenance should be reviewed with all employees who wear a respirator. The positive and negative pressure check procedures should be reviewed. If an employee notes any leaks, they should be reported so a fit test can be administered and a new respirator issued, if necessary. A fit test should also be considered if:

- Facial hair has been added
- Eyewear has been changed/added
- An obvious change in weight has occurred
- Any other condition interferes with the face-to-facepiece seal of the respirator

Telecommuting Policy

During unexpected events, employers may consider implementing telecommuting arrangements for their employees. When returning to work, consider reviewing your existing telecommuting policy or implementing a new policy based on new business needs. A well-developed telecommuting policy can be beneficial for businesses to execute a gradual return to work.

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