



Tips and Frequently Asked Questions for Opening Office Facilities During COVID-19

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The following guidance was developed by the San Francisco Department of Public Health (SFPDH) and is posted at <https://www.sfcdcp.org>. This interim guidance may change as knowledge, community transmission, and availability of PPE and testing change.

AUDIENCE: Businesses who bring Personnel back to office facilities during the COVID-19 pandemic.

BACKGROUND: On October 27, 2020, the Health Officer issued [Directive No. 2020-18b](#) authorizing and providing guidance for businesses operating office facilities.

PURPOSE: This document addresses major points in, but does not replace, the Directive.

Summary of Revisions since the 06/29/2020 Version

- Non-essential offices may open with up to 25% of capacity
- Offices may open for workers who would otherwise telecommute
- Offices may open employee cafeterias and break rooms
- New ventilation requirements and recommendations are included
- New signs are available
- New COVID-19 information and guidance is included

Preventing COVID-19 Transmission

How does COVID-19 Spread?

Our current understanding is that COVID-19 is mostly spread from person-to-person in the air through virus-containing droplets in the breath of someone with COVID-19. These droplets enter the air when a person exhales (breathes out), including when they talk, sing, cough, or sneeze. People with COVID-19 may have no symptoms at all and can still be breathing out virus-containing droplets.

- Larger droplets are sometimes called “ballistic droplets” because they travel in straight lines and are pulled down by gravity. People nearby, usually within 6 feet, are infected when they breathe in these droplets or if the droplets land in their eyes, nose, or mouth.
- Smaller droplets or infectious particles can float in the air for a period of time and/or travel beyond 6 feet on indoor air currents, especially in enclosed spaces with poor ventilation. People sharing the same space are infected when they breathe in these smaller droplets and particles or the droplets or particles land on their eyes, nose, or mouth – even if they are further than 6 feet away. These droplets are sometimes referred to as “aerosols” or “bioaerosols”.

COVID-19 can also spread if a person touches their eyes, nose or mouth after touching a contaminated surface (also known as a fomite), however this is less common.

COVID-19 Prevention

To prevent transmission, everyone should:

- Wash your hands often with soap and water. If soap and water are not available, use a hand sanitizer that contains at least 60% ethanol or 70 % isopropanol.
- Avoid Close Contact. To the greatest extent, maintain at least six feet of social distancing between



yourself and the people who don't live in your Household.

- Wear a Face Covering. Cover your mouth and nose with a Face Covering in public settings and when around people who don't live in your Household.
- Routinely clean and disinfect frequently touched surfaces.
- Monitor Your Health Daily. Be alert of symptoms such as fever, cough, shortness of breath, or other symptoms. If you are experiencing any of these symptoms, stay home.

Indoor Risk

Scientists agree that the risk of transmitting COVID-19 is generally much greater indoors than outdoors. Consider the increased risk to yourself and your community while planning for office opening or expansion. Any increase in the number of people indoors or the length of time spent indoors increases risk. Small rooms, narrow hallways, small elevators, weak ventilation all increase indoor risk. Each activity that can be done outdoors, remotely, by teleconference reduces risk. Consider outdoor covered walkway to avoid line to check in. Consider having a single person come to the office to represent a group that teleconferences.

The Role Of Ventilation

Good ventilation controls droplets and infectious particles to prevent COVID-19 transmission by:

- removing air containing droplets and particles from the room,
- diluting the concentration of droplets and particles by adding fresh, uncontaminated air.
- filtering room air, removing droplets and particles from the air.

Make Necessary Ventilation Improvements, If Feasible, Including

- HVAC systems (if one is present)
 - Ensure HVAC systems are serviced and functioning properly.
 - Evaluate possibilities for upgrading air filters to the highest efficiency possible.
 - Increase the percentage of outdoor air through the HVAC system, readjusting or overriding recirculation ("economizer") dampers.
 - Disable "demand controls" on ventilation systems so that fans operate continuously, independently of heating or cooling needs.
 - Evaluate running the building ventilation system even when the building is unoccupied to maximize ventilation. At the minimum, reset timer-operated ventilation systems so that they start operating 1-2 hours before the building opens and 2-3 hours after the building is closed.
- Increase natural ventilation by opening windows and doors when environmental conditions and building requirements allow.
- Consider installing portable air cleaners ("HEPA filters").
- If the establishment uses pedestal fans or hard mounted fans, adjust the direction of fans to minimize air blowing from one individual's space to another's space.

For more information and additional resources, please see the [SFDPH ventilation guidance](#).



Conference Rooms and Meetings

Conference and meeting rooms may open up to 25% of the posted occupancy, and no more than the number of people who can safely maintain six feet of physical distance at all times.

- Face to face meetings increase risk and are highly discouraged in indoor environments.
- Video and phone conferencing are significantly safer.
- Video conferencing also allows full participation by workers who are off site.
- If a meeting cannot be avoided, notify participants in advance that socializing before and after the meeting is an unacceptable risk.
- Limit the number of in person invitees by integrating video and phone conferencing.
- Eating and drinking are prohibited in meetings because face covering are removed.
- Activate conference room ventilation 1-2 hours before people enter the room. Open doors and windows if possible.
- Post COVID-19 occupancy and safety signs in conference and meeting rooms.
- Conference and meeting rooms that are used must receive frequent cleaning and disinfecting.

Eating in the Cafeteria, Break Room, Outdoors or at a Desk

Office Cafeterias may open and should follow the [COVID-19 dining guidance](#). In addition employee cafeterias should:

- Strongly encourage outdoor dining,
- Limit capacity to the number of people who can maintain six feet of physical distance, up to 25% of occupancy,
- Post signage about occupancy, face coverings, social distancing, and hand hygiene,
- Offer grab-and-go food if possible, and
- Not allow socializing or group dining.
- Provide sheltered outdoor space if at all possible.
- Use scheduling, furniture and signs to eliminate lines and crowding, and to reduce the time that anyone spends in the cafeteria or eating area.

Eating requires removing face coverings, placing people at increased risk. Stay safe while eating by:

- Eating outdoors, weather permitting and with at least six feet of space in every direction
- Opening doors and window whenever possible
- Eating at your desk or alone in a room/office
- Not socializing while eating
- Replacing face covering as soon as you are done eating

Break rooms are generally not a good choice for eating when others are present. At a minimum, be sure there is six feet of physical distance between people, good ventilation, good hygiene and appropriate dining signage.



Mandatory Signage Requirements and Resources

Add all COVID-19 related signage to the Office as required by [Sections 4.g and 4.h of the Stay-Safer-At-Home Order](#). Complete signage requirements are described starting with Best Practices [Section 1.5 of Health Officer Directive 20-18b](#).

The [Outreach Toolkit](#) includes printable resources including many of the signs required or suggested to open offices. Signs about proper hygiene, social distancing, Face Coverings, health screening, the risks of indoor transmission, testing and getting vaccinated for the flu are all available.

Promoting Workplace COVID-19 Safety

Employers and management should actively promote safe COVID-19 habits. Businesses have successfully used small incentives such as decorative face coverings and public recognition to reduce COVID-19 transmission. Intervening and noticing lapses may well prevent costly illness. An educational approach to confrontation has generally been the most successful. Recognition and intervention work best when done at both a group level and an individual level. Managers and supervisors should always model safe practices.

Flu Vaccination

Flu vaccines are critical in the fight against COVID-19 by (1) keeping workers and communities healthy and (2) reducing strain on our healthcare and testing systems that are responding to COVID-19. Strongly encourage all personnel to get a flu shot. Post signage to encourage flu vaccine among customers, visitors, etc.

Contact Tracing

SFDPH, in partnership with community, including businesses, helps identify those who have had close contact with anyone who has COVID-19. People can transmit the virus 48 hours before they develop symptoms. Some people never develop symptoms and can still transmit the virus. We can help prevent COVID-19 transmission by contact tracing which helps identify people who may have been exposed and helping them quarantine so they don't inadvertently spread the disease. We do this whenever there is an outbreak of infectious diseases like measles, tuberculosis, and others to protect the community's health.

Help ensure the health of your personnel and our community. Retain the attendance/schedules of all Personnel for up to three weeks. It is recommended that organizations maintain a list of your office users willing to voluntarily provide their name and contact information for contact tracing purposes. Any lists should be discarded after three weeks. Patrons are not required to provide contact information.

If Personnel, a contractor, delivery person, or visitor tests positive for COVID-19, the organization must assist the SFDPH in identifying other personnel or others who may have been exposed.

Cover your face, test early, and trace! Find out more at <https://covid19.ca.gov/contact-tracing>

Scheduling and Commuting

To manage occupancy in the office and ease pressure on the transit system, offices should provide information and flexibility to help Personnel make the best choices for commuting to work. Effective measures to reduce individual risk of COVID-19, limit community transmission and aid in economic recovery include:

- Allow employees to continue working remotely as much as possible;
- Adopt alternative work schedules so Personnel are not all in the office at the same time;
- Stagger working hours to shift travel to off-peak times;



- If applicable, encourage Personnel to use alternative transportation such as walking or biking;
- Provide flexibility to Personnel who may be late if they need to wait for a less crowded public transit vehicle.

For information and resources visit <https://SFMTA.com/TransportationGuidance>

FAQ

What do I need to do in order to comply with the Directive?

Before returning employees to the office, be sure you have read the entire Directive and best practices and take at least the following steps: complete adjustments to the layout of your office to be sure employees can remain at least six feet apart at all times; check plumbing to be sure it is functioning properly and flush pipes if necessary; make any necessary improvements to ventilation; add necessary signage to elevators, stairs, break rooms, and cafeterias; implement daily COVID-19 self-verifications for all personnel; and implement sanitization protocols.

You are required to create and consistently implement the following two documents, which will help you ensure you are following all the mandated steps.

- Health and Safety Plan (see [Exhibit B of Directive No. 2020-18b](#)) which may be amended.
- Social Distancing Protocol (see [Appendix A of the Stay-Safer-At-Home Health Order C19-071](#)), which may be amended. You will need to ensure these documents are available for all Personnel. They should be posted at the entrance to the office site. If other Directives apply to your business, you may need to complete more than one Health and Safety Plan.

I've created the plans, so am I done now?

At least on a weekly basis, think about how your Business and Personnel are doing, how well you are complying with your Health and Safety Plan and your Social Distancing Protocol, and what changes are needed to improve your response to the COVID-19 pandemic. Look for new guidance from the SFDPH Communicable Disease Control and Prevention site (<https://www.sfcddcp.org/covid19>) or the frequently updated page at <https://sf.gov/topics/business-during-coronavirus-pandemic> which has comprehensive resources for businesses during the COVID-19 pandemic.

May all of my staff return to my non-essential office facility if I can keep them socially distanced?

It depends on how many staff members you have. For non-essential office facilities with fewer than 20 personnel, the business must reduce the maximum occupancy to the number of people who can maintain at least six feet of physical distance from each other in the office facility at all times. For non-essential office facilities with more than 20 personnel, the business must reduce the maximum occupancy to the lesser of 25% of the facility's normal maximum occupancy or the number of people who can maintain at least six feet of physical distance from each other in the facility at all times. Telecommuting is still strongly encouraged whenever feasible.

Is my employee required to wear a Face Covering while in their private office alone, or while sitting at their desk around which I have installed Plexiglas dividers?

You do not need to wear a Face Covering if you are alone in a private office that is not shared with others and is not likely to be visited by others without prior warning, such as an office with a closed door. If another person enters the area, both of you must immediately put on a Face Covering during the interaction.



What should I do if Personnel answer “Yes” to any of the [daily screening questions](#)?

The Health and Safety Plan should include your plan for safe transport of Personnel who become sick while at work to home or a healthcare provider. Further information is available on:

- [what to do if personnel have a positive COVID-19 test](#), and
- [when personnel can return to work](#) after COVID-19 symptoms, testing, or close contact.

If my employee tests positive for COVID-19 will SFPDH tell me? If they test positive in a county outside of SF will I be notified?

SFPDH or another county health department may contact employers to trace contacts, but the identity of the person who has tested positive for COVID-19 is protected health information, and typically cannot be shared except in select circumstances.

What should I be prepared to tell SFPDH to assist with contact tracing if my employee tells me that they have tested positive for COVID-19?

You should determine the last day that the person who was diagnosed with COVID-19 was present at the workplace. Be prepared to identify any close contacts the person had at the workplace. In an office setting, close contacts are defined as someone who was within 6 feet of the person diagnosed with COVID-19 for more than 10 minutes while the person with COVID-19 was not wearing a facemask.

Can I provide more business space outdoors?

Outdoor work environments generally have much less risk of COVID-19 transmission. Some businesses have been able to use patios, awnings, canopies, tents and covered walkways to expand space while reducing risk of indoor transmission. SFPDH has developed [guidance for creating outdoor shelters](#) that may be useful for offices.

Resources

Local:

Information for businesses at <https://www.sfcddp.org/businesses>

How to [get tested for COVID-19 in San Francisco](#)

Downloadable [signage to print](#) yourself, or to request [printed posters](#)

Information from the [San Francisco Office of Economic and Workforce Development about COVID-19](#), such as employer requirements, employee benefits, and resources; [Avoiding discrimination and retaliation during COVID-19](#).

California:

[State of California Resilience Roadmap](#)

CAL OSHA [information on protecting workers from COVID-19](#)

National:

[AIHA- Reopening: Guidance for General Office Settings](#)

CDC: Resuming Business Toolkit: [CDC Resuming Business Toolkit](#)

[CDC Return to Work Guidance](#)

[CDC COVID-19 Employer Information for Office Buildings](#)