



U.S. Small Business
Administration

QUICK START GUIDE

Preparing your Workforce for Vaccine Requirements

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Preface

The United States is weathering one of the greatest health crises in our history. Fortunately, safe, and effective vaccines offer hope that we can turn the tide against COVID-19 and get back to life and the things we love. Vaccines save lives. They also require trust, transparency, and accountability.

This document provides general guidance for communicating about COVID-19 vaccines to workers, customers, and other stakeholders. There's no one-size-fits-all approach, so you should be prepared to customize outreach for groups with unique needs and questions. To help you get started, we've also prepared key messages, and guidance for responding to sensitive questions.

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Introduction

The COVID-19 pandemic has exposed deep vulnerabilities in our nation's public health infrastructure. We've lost lives, intensified inequities, and eroded years of progress across our economy. Getting back to our lives—back to seeing our loved ones, back to school and back to business—requires that we turn the tide against COVID-19 and create a stronger, healthier future for all of us. Vaccines, highly effective and safe, offer hope and protection that can help our country and our economy rebuild and recover.

We're on our way, but significant challenges remain, including the emergence of a highly transmissible Delta variant that's driving a new wave of infections across the country. Public health officials warn that we must encourage many more Americans to get vaccinated, including more than 80 million people in the United States who are currently eligible for vaccines but remain unvaccinated and at real risk.

On September 9, 2021, the Biden administration announced a new plan that obligates all employers with more than 100 workers to require vaccination or weekly testing for COVID-19. Now that the question of whether to require vaccinations has been settled, employers face a long list of questions about *how* to do it.

The Labor Department's Occupational Safety and Health Administration (OSHA) plans to issue an Emergency Temporary Standard implementing the new requirement in the coming weeks. Fortunately, there are now numerous examples of companies that have implemented vaccine mandates successfully; the roadmap is already in place. Employers that have not already begun laying the groundwork for vaccine requirements will need to act swiftly. Employee communication and engagement strategies, stakeholder feedback coupled with change management can do much to maintain morale and avert staff losses.

This guide is designed to help you get started.

Summary of Recommendations

A fully vaccinated workforce creates the safest possible workplace environment for employees and customers. It may also be the most equitable policy, especially if the alternative is regular testing, paid for by your workers. If a vaccination requirement is not an option for your business, we recommend these steps:

- **Routine Testing:** Require all workers and regular visitors (not retail customers) to be [routinely screened](#) with a rapid test, at least weekly. Repeated negative tests provide a high degree of certainty that the individual is not infectious. Beginning January 4, 2022, testing at least weekly is required for employers of 100 or more workers who do not have a COVID-19 vaccination requirement.
- **Proof of Vaccination:** Allow anyone who provides proof of full vaccination (accounting for the appropriate time period after the final vaccine) to bypass the routine testing requirement.
- **Support Workers:** Employers are encouraged to provide paid time off for vaccinations and recovery from possible side effects — which is required for employers of 100 or more workers beginning December 6, 2021. Businesses should extend this support to working parents who choose to vaccinate eligible children, too. Consider organizing on-site vaccination clinics for workers and families, or offering transportation support, childcare, or incentives to improve access to vaccines.
- **Mask Use:** Require masks for all employees and customers, regardless of vaccination status, in [areas with substantial or high transmission](#). As more people get vaccinated in these areas, transmission rates are expected to drop. Beginning December 6, 2021, employers of 100 or more workers must require unvaccinated workers to wear masks.

Employers are encouraged to:

1. **Create a clear COVID-19 vaccination policy for employees, part-time workers, temporary workers, and contractors that requires or encourages vaccination, reduces barriers, and makes it easy for them to get vaccinated.** Your policy should be

aligned with your company's values and reflect the unique needs, concerns, and questions of diverse communities.

- 2. Share facts about the safety and benefits of COVID-19 vaccines. This can include inviting trusted experts to answer questions during paid working hours.**
- 3. Create a safe, supportive workplace culture where all workers feel supported.** Understand that no community shares all of the same beliefs, perceptions, and concerns. Every individual is unique, and every employee deserves to have their questions answered before deciding about vaccines. Getting vaccinated is an individual choice that you should respect — even if it means an employee cannot continue working for you.
- 4. Strengthen vaccination efforts in your community** by engaging with public health departments, nonprofit organizations and others involved in the vaccine response.

As you consider how to implement your company's COVID-19 vaccination policy and workplace safety protocols, you should be guided by trust and empathy, meaningful input from workers representing communities disproportionately impacted by COVID-19, the specific values of your company, and needs of your community.

How to Use This Guide

This Quick Start Guide provides employers with key policy considerations, recommended actions, and tools you can use to:

- 1. Establish a COVID-19 vaccination policy and plan.**
- 2. Educate** employees, workers, and other stakeholders about the importance, efficacy, and safety of COVID-19 vaccination, and **encourage** them to get vaccinated.
- 3. Accelerate** the distribution of COVID-19 vaccines and vaccination efforts in the communities you serve and engage with local public health departments to support vaccination efforts.

I: Strengthen Your COVID-19 Vaccination Policy and Workplace Safety Protocol

All employers are encouraged to develop a COVID-19 vaccination policy and workplace safety protocol that reflects a careful review of the latest public health, legal and safety considerations. As employers weigh these options, they should prioritize the health and safety of workers and customers and consider local community vaccination rates and guidance from local public health officials. They should also plan to regularly evaluate and update policies and protocols as the pandemic and federal, state, and local guidance evolve.

A fully vaccinated workforce creates the safest possible workplace environment for employees and customers. Everyone in the United States ages 5 and older is eligible to receive free COVID-19 vaccines, regardless of immigration status. You don't need health insurance to get vaccinated for COVID-19. Vaccines are free and [widely available](#) at more than 80,000 locations across the country, including over 40,000 retail pharmacies. Ninety percent of Americans live within five miles of a vaccine site.

Against the backdrop of a still-rapidly surging Delta variant, employers should develop a plan to remove barriers to vaccination and make it easier for employees and workers to get vaccinated at their earliest opportunity. Existing plans and policies may need to be updated to reflect the federal requirements for companies of 100 or more workers and the [recommendations](#) that employers offer paid time off and other support to working parents who want to vaccinate eligible children against COVID-19.

Three Implementation Steps:

Step 1: Designate a coordinator or task force.

Building your company's COVID-19 Vaccination Policy and Workplace Safety Protocol will require navigating technical, logistical, organizational and communications challenges. Identify a leader within your company whose adept at responding to employee, worker, and stakeholder questions, and is well-positioned to coordinate with management, human resources, employee resource groups, workers, and labor representatives, as appropriate. Leading your company's COVID-19 vaccine planning is a complex and time-consuming

assignment, so be sure to empower a leader who has the authority, trust, empathy, communication skills *and* capacity to serve in this role.

For larger companies, you may want to establish a COVID-19 vaccine task force with representation from each of the key departments. Input from a racially and ethnically diverse cross section of your company can help ensure you understand specific needs and questions within communities that have been hit hardest by the virus.

What should they do?

- Review the latest [public health, legal and safety considerations](#) that can inform the development of your company's plan.
- Coordinate among internal and external stakeholders.
- Identify and minimize any barriers to vaccination, such as time off, daycare or transportation.
- Gather employee and worker feedback in real time and listen to questions and concerns.
- Engage employees and workers from disproportionately impacted communities, including via employee resource groups and other networks that represent workers at highest risk.
- Stay abreast of employee vaccination trends and concerns to adapt the plan as needed.
- Oversee internal and external vaccination communications.
- Identify opportunities for your company to partner with [state and local public health agencies](#) and community-based organizations to support vaccine distribution in your area.
- Establish measurements of your policy's effectiveness, including changes in vaccination rates, exemptions requested and received, administrative costs, employee satisfaction, and personnel turnover.

Step 2: Engage workforce populations that may have unique questions, concerns, or access needs.

As you develop or refine your plan, make sure you proactively engage leaders of your company's employee resource or affinity groups and other employee populations that may have unique questions, concerns, or access needs. This isn't about convincing workers to trust the vaccine; it's about understanding their perspectives and concerns and working together to identify solutions. Because some demographic groups face barriers to vaccines, those employees may be negatively and disproportionately impacted by a vaccination requirement. Below are strategies you may consider:

- Black, Hispanic, Asian-American, American Indian, and Alaska Native communities have been disproportionately impacted by COVID-19, and have experienced higher rates of hospitalization, severe illness, and death. If you're not a member of these population groups, start by learning more about why these inequities exist and how they might contribute to additional questions about vaccines. You can support employees and workers by acknowledging the deep historical traumas and [structural inequalities](#) that lead to poorer health outcomes and contribute to greater mistrust.
- Invite leaders from your company's employee resource groups to participate in your company's COVID-19 Vaccine task force and meaningfully contribute to developing your company's vaccine plan.
- Organize listening sessions with your employees that represent communities disproportionately impacted by COVID-19 to make sure all interests are heard and develop plans that meet the communities' needs.
- Reach out to local community organizations, healthcare provider networks, faith leaders or other trusted influencers within diverse populations to seek their counsel and feedback on your company's plan.

Step 3: Draft your company policy.

On November 4, 2021, the Occupational Safety and Health Administration (OSHA) issued new rules that obligate all employers with 100 or more workers to require vaccination or weekly testing for COVID-19. **A fully vaccinated workforce creates the safest possible workplace**

environment for employees and customers. Many companies have announced policies to require vaccinations for all or part of their workforce, adding to the millions of federal workers and contractors now required to show proof of vaccination.

If a vaccination requirement is not an option for your business, we recommend these steps:

- **Routine Testing:** Require all workers and regular visitors (not retail customers) to be [routinely screened](#) with a rapid test, at least weekly. Repeated negative tests provide a high degree of certainty that the individual is not infectious. Beginning January 4, 2022, testing at least weekly is required for employers of 100 or more workers who do not have a COVID-19 vaccination requirement.
- **Proof of Vaccination:** Allow anyone who provides proof of full vaccination (accounting for the appropriate time period after the final vaccine) to bypass the routine testing requirement.
- **Support Workers:** Employers are encouraged to provide paid time off for vaccinations and recovery from possible side effects—which is required for employers of 100 or more workers beginning December 6, 2021. Businesses should extend this support to working parents who choose to vaccinate eligible children, too. Consider offering paid time off and other incentives for vaccination and recovery from possible side effects, including for working parents who choose to vaccinate eligible children. Consider organizing [on-site vaccination clinics](#) for workers and families, or offering transportation support, childcare or incentives to improve access to vaccines.
- **Mask Use:** Require masks for all company’s employees and customers, regardless of vaccination status, in [areas with substantial or high transmission](#).

Our recommendations are based on [public health guidance](#) from the U.S. Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC), [safety guidance](#) offered by the Occupational Safety and Health Administration (OSHA), [legal considerations](#) established by the Equal Employment Opportunity Commission (EEOC) and additional feedback from COVID Collaborative and the National Safety Council. Here are some of the key questions your company’s policy should address:

Vaccine Requirements

- Must I require vaccinations for my employees?
- What are my options for confirming vaccination status?
- How should I handle vaccine exemption requests?
- If I don't require vaccines, how will I manage a partially vaccinated workforce?
- Can I ask customers for proof of vaccination or deny service to customers who aren't vaccinated?

Paid Time Off & Incentives

- Should I offer paid time off to workers for vaccinations and recovery, including to vaccinate eligible children?

Masking & Other Safety Protocols

- Should I require my employees and customers to wear masks?
- Should I require COVID-19 testing for my employees?
- Should I track or restrict employee travel?

Prioritize Equity

Equity should be top of mind as you develop your policy. Apply an equity and access “lens” to ask yourself whether your policy risks harming workers from populations already disproportionately impacted by the pandemic. Here are some steps your company can take:

- **Consider applying a single policy across all sectors of your workplace.**

Having different requirements for different sectors of your workforce — for example, requiring vaccines for employees in the office, but not for those in customer-facing roles — risks creating a tiered system of safety. Especially if workers from disproportionately affected communities predominate in certain roles, employers should strive for a consistent policy that prioritizes everyone's health and safety. Make policies and enforcement transparent, consistent, and equitable across your workforce.

- **Offer positive incentives before taking punitive actions.**

Well-intended “nudges,” such as healthcare plan surcharges on unvaccinated workers, might make health insurance unaffordable for lower-income employees, hourly workers, and communities of color. As an alternative, ask workers from hard-hit communities what incentives would encourage them to get vaccinated and offer that instead.

- **Be thoughtful about your messengers and messages.**

Cultivate trusted messengers who reflect a diversity of communities and can speak to the unique concerns of affected groups. It’s also important to make sure you have messaging and resources in Spanish or other native languages spoken by your workforce. In written communications and in conversation, build trust, express empathy, and listen for what’s holding people back then help them find their own reason to get vaccinated.

- **Share stories from like-minded employees who’ve gotten vaccinated.**

Invite employees from underrepresented groups who have been vaccinated to share their vaccination experience, as well as stories of how the pandemic may have impacted them and their families. People are more likely to get vaccinated if they know a friend or family member who was vaccinated, and reassuring stories from peers are almost as important as getting the facts.

- **Provide ample time for employees to get vaccinated, including time that may be needed to learn more about vaccines or get questions answered from a doctor or other trusted source.**

Paid time off to get vaccinated and recover from possible side effects — for workers themselves and eligible family members — is one of the most [significant barriers](#) to vaccination. Even beyond that, employees may need time or assistance to navigate online portals to book appointments, to arrange travel to/from their vaccine appointment, and to plan for potential side effects to the vaccine. Some workers may need time to learn more about vaccines, speak with a doctor or other trusted source or consider how they’ll respond to workplace requirements before ultimately getting their shot. And finally, make sure to extend paid time off,

incentives and other benefits across your entire workforce, including hourly, seasonal, and part-time workers.

Employers should also consult their legal counsel and review state and local laws before making any decisions about workplace policies related to the pandemic.

Additional Ways to Support Workers

Research has shown additional ways employers can support or incentivize workers to get vaccinated.

- Cover **out-of-pocket expenses** associated with vaccination. This could include offering an Uber or Lyft gift card for transportation, a small stipend for lunch or reimbursement for childcare.
- Extend benefits and support to your **entire workforce**, including temporary, part-time or contract workers.
- Help **identify where workers can get vaccinated**. Search [vaccines.gov](https://www.vaccines.gov), text your ZIP code to 438829, or call 1-800-232-0233 to find locations near you.
- Offer **internet access** or **language support services** to help employees and workers schedule appointments.
- Some small businesses may be able to partner with a local public health department or other providers to offer **on-site vaccinations** to employees, even during late shifts, and to their eligible family members.
- Consider providing small prizes, rewards, or other **modest financial incentives** (i.e., gift cards, coupons, tokens, etc.) to employees and customers workers who get vaccinated.
- **Remind employees** that vaccines are free and available to everyone in the United States ages 5 and older, regardless of immigration status. You don't need health insurance to get a COVID-19 vaccine.

II. Educate and Encourage Your Workforce

There are still 80 million Americans who are eligible to get vaccinated but remain unvaccinated and at real risk. **As an employer, the most important thing you can do is communicate with your employees, workers and customers about the benefits and safety of COVID-19 vaccines and encourage them to get vaccinated.** Your outreach can also help counter misinformation about vaccines.

Vaccines save lives. They also require trust, transparency, and accountability. The factors that influence a person's decision to get vaccinated are nuanced and affected by how they see and experience the world. Science and facts aren't the only predictors of human behavior. People make vaccine decisions based on social norms, their perceptions of how others will view their decision, feedback from people they trust, their perceptions of risk, the consistency of messages and the convenience of getting vaccinated.

It all starts with trust

It's important you share trusted information from the CDC, FDA, and other public health experts, as well as perspectives and encouragement from trusted community leaders to help your employees, workers, customers, and other stakeholders make the best decisions for themselves and their families. And you can listen and respond to their questions and needs, as well as dispel misinformation about company policies or vaccination issues that may arise.

All vaccine requirements, whether mandated by the federal government or initiated independently, need thoughtful planning and communication. To help you get started, we offer general communications guidance to help employers communicate about COVID-19 vaccine requirements to workers, customers, and the media. There's no one-size-fits-all approach, so you should be prepared to customize outreach for groups with unique needs and questions.

COVID-19 vaccines can help us get back to the things we love.

- We all want to get back to our lives. Vaccinations can help us get back too many of the things we miss most. This includes spending time with loved ones and friends, traveling and going to events.

- Here at [COMPANY], we're committed to sharing trusted information about COVID-19 vaccines. Our mission is [ADD HERE], and helping our employees and workers stay healthy is a top priority.

Note: Make a direct connection between your mission and your motives for sharing vaccine information. Be direct and transparent. Will COVID-19 vaccines help you work better together? Allow your employees to get back out into the community? Ensure that the services you provide are safe? Let your people do the work they love?

Vaccines are free and widely available.

- Everyone in the United States ages 5 and older is eligible to receive free COVID-19 vaccines, regardless of immigration status. You don't need health insurance to get vaccinated for COVID-19.
- Vaccines are widely available at more than 80,000 locations across the country, including at over 40,000 retail pharmacies. Ninety percent of Americans live within five miles of a vaccine site.
- Search [vaccines.gov](https://www.vaccines.gov), text your ZIP code to 438829, or call 1-800-232-0233 to find locations near you.
- In order to protect yourself and prevent the spread, it's important that you get vaccinated at your earliest opportunity.

COVID-19 vaccines are safe, and they work.

- There are multiple COVID-19 vaccines that have been granted Emergency Use Authorization (EUA) by the U.S. Food and Drug Administration (FDA). This means the clinical evidence for the vaccines have met the agency's rigorous scientific standards and are considered to be safe and effective. They have been studied in clinical trials with large and diverse groups of people, of various ages, races, and ethnicities.
- On August 23, 2021, the FDA announced full approval of the Pfizer-BioNTech vaccine for adults ages 16 and older. Full FDA approval takes longer than Emergency Use Authorization because more data needs to be processed and reviewed over a longer period of time. When a product is fully approved by the

FDA, patients can be assured that its recommendation is grounded in large amounts of scientific data.

- Vaccines teach our immune systems how to recognize and fight the virus that causes COVID-19 without having to get sick or put yourself and others at risk of severe illness and death.
- Getting vaccinated is a much safer way to build protection than getting the disease. COVID-19 can have serious, long-term, or life-threatening complications, and there is no way to know how COVID-19 will affect you. And if you get infected, you could spread the disease to friends, family, and others around you.
- You may have some side effects after getting vaccinated. That's a normal sign that your body is building protection—and they should go away within a few days. Your arm may be sore or swollen. You may also feel tired, have a headache, fever, or chills. This does not mean you have COVID-19—in fact, it's not possible to get COVID-19 from vaccines.
- Vaccines are being administered by trained health professionals. Some people might be offered a vaccine that requires two doses, given several weeks apart, while other people might be offered a single-dose vaccine. It may take several weeks after vaccination for your body to be ready to fight the virus if you are exposed.
- The vaccines' effectiveness against COVID-19 remains high, especially in protecting people against serious illness or death. In fact, boosters show that medical experts are continuing to find ways to prolong protection through vaccines.
- If you are immunocompromised or have a weakened immune system, CDC recommends that you receive a third dose of the Pfizer-BioNTech or Moderna COVID-19 vaccines to strengthen your protection against Delta. You should speak with your doctor or healthcare provider about whether a third vaccine dose and other precautions are right for you.

Our organization's top priority is the health and safety of our employees, their families, and our customers.

- If you are [sick with COVID-19](#) or think you might have COVID-19, stay home except to get medical care, separate yourself from other people and take other precautions to prevent the spread. And tell your manager as soon as safely possible so we can assess whether any other members of our team could have been exposed.
- You should get tested for COVID-19 if you have symptoms, have close contact (within 6 feet for a total of 15 minutes or more over a 24-hour period) with someone with confirmed COVID-19, or take part in activities that put you at higher risk for COVID-19, regardless of vaccination status.
 - If you are already fully vaccinated, you should get tested 3-5 days after exposure, and wear a mask in public indoor settings for 14 days or until you receive a negative test result.
 - If you are not fully vaccinated, you should quarantine and get tested immediately after exposure, and, if negative, tested again in 5–7 days after last exposure or immediately if symptoms develop during quarantine.
- Even after you are fully vaccinated, CDC recommends that everyone wear masks in public indoor settings in [areas with substantial or high](#) COVID-19 transmission. A majority of counties across the U.S. are experiencing either “substantial” or “high” transmission rates that call for indoor mask-wearing, according to CDC.

It is normal to have questions.

- It’s normal to be cautious when something new comes along. Getting informed about COVID-19 vaccines is an important step to help us stop this pandemic.
- Talk to your doctor or healthcare provider. We all need to be comfortable with our decisions and your doctor can help.
- OK...what questions do you have? (For answers to frequently asked questions about COVID-19 vaccines, visit [vaccines.gov](#).)

III: Support Vaccine Distribution in Your Community

Delivering and administering hundreds of millions of COVID-19 vaccinations represents one the greatest communications, logistical and public health challenges in our country's history. The private sector has unique expertise and resources that can help accelerate the vaccine response, save lives, and contribute to a faster recovery.

There are many ways your company might support local public health officials and strengthen vaccine distribution in your community.

- **Lead by example.** As a trusted leader in your community, you can encourage other businesses to share facts about the safety and benefits of vaccines; offer paid time off to workers for vaccine appointments and recovery, including to attend vaccine appointments with eligible children; and align workplace safety protocols with the latest public health guidance.
- Encourage your local chamber of commerce or rotary club to host an **educational conversation** on the role of businesses in the vaccine response, and volunteer to share what you've learned.
- Encourage your customers to get vaccinated by offering special **coupons, discounts, or other incentives.**
- Share vaccine facts on your product packaging or at your place of business.
- Donate **advertising space or airtime** to your local public health department or to community organizations that are educating the public about the vaccines. (Or if they don't have a local campaign, sponsor them to create one or donate your ad agency's time to help.)
- Engage with your local public health department to help address other needs, including transportation, childcare, language support or other services that may help improve access and remove barriers to vaccination in your community.

If you'd like to donate space, staff, or supplies to aid local vaccination efforts, your [local public health department](#) is the place to start. For those who are not already in contact with their local public health department, this outreach can serve as an introduction that helps to build a longer-term partnership focused on your company's health, wellness, and preparedness goals.

Tools and Resources

- U.S. Small Business Administration: [COVID-19 Guidance and Loan Resources](#)
- [COVID-19 Dashboard](#) (also available in [Spanish](#))
- [Data Tracker](#)
- [Science and Research](#)
- [Vaccines](#)
- [Workplace Guidance and Strategies](#)
- [Communication Resources](#)
- [Public Service Announcements](#)
- [Stress and Coping](#)
- [What to Expect After Getting a COVID-19 Vaccine](#)
- [Newsletter/Blog Content](#)
- ["I Got My COVID Vaccine" Stickers](#)
- Download video PSAs from [CDC](#)
- Download radio PSAs from [CDC](#)
- CDC: [COVID-19 Vaccine Resources](#) and [Communications Resources](#)
- U.S. Department of Labor Occupational Safety and Health Administration [COVID-19 Guidance by Industry](#)