

Return-to-Work: Managing Employee Population Health During and Beyond the COVID-19 Pandemic

Background

- This article delivers evidence-based perspectives for self-insured employers to manage employee population health during the COVID-19 pandemic. Included are some anticipated changes to employee healthcare that will likely continue after the pandemic.

Evidence-based perspectives

- **Return-to-work practices aimed at the containing the spread of COVID-19**
 - **Face masks and screening:** Important workplace practices include face mask use at all times when around other people and daily screening for COVID-19 symptoms before employees enter the work site, with separation of symptomatic employees.
 - **Diagnostic and population-based testing:** Employees with COVID-19 symptoms can consider molecular testing and avoidance of the workplace while awaiting results. Testing asymptomatic employees may help identify people with COVID-19 early and reduce transmission. The article includes advantages and disadvantages of different testing types (point-of-care, antigen, serological, home collection).
 - **Surveillance:** A system that integrates all workplace-related COVID-19 information (including testing and positivity rates) facilitates quick identification of people with COVID-19, isolation of those individuals, and contact tracing. A command center can inform population-level trends by integrating internal and external data, including symptoms, employee data, community infection rates, and laboratory test data.
- **Impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on employee healthcare**
 - **Anticipated impact on health benefits and costs:** Forecasting healthcare costs may be challenging owing to the pandemic, but the following factors could affect costs:
 - The most current vaccine protocols and treatments
 - Shifting healthcare coverage from commercial employer-sponsored plans to individual, Medicare, or Medicaid plans
 - Costs caused by delayed diagnoses and treatments, postponed elective procedures, and lapses in managing underlying health conditions
 - Managing changes in supply and demand that could be caused by COVID-19
 - **Adaptations in the delivery of care:** Innovative approaches will need to be implemented to deliver care. Some tools and factors to consider are the following:
 - Increasing accessibility to care through telemedicine
 - Mitigating delays in annual screening, which may impair diagnoses, treatments, and chronic disease management
 - Offering and encouraging influenza vaccines to reduce flu transmission in the workplace and strain on medical resources
 - Understanding and addressing employee social conditions that affect health
 - Supporting the increased need for mental healthcare
 - Anticipating increased costs and health complications caused by disrupted management of chronic conditions

Conclusions

- Employers can use screening, testing, and surveillance to help contain the spread of COVID-19 in the workplace.
- They can also consider many factors that will affect healthcare cost forecasts and consider adjusting the delivery of healthcare to meet the challenges of the pandemic.

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