

# 5 Steps to Prepare to go Back to Work

Betsy McCaughey, Ph.D.

If your employer has decided that it's time for you to go back to the office, here are five things that you can do to help protect yourself from COVID-19 or other infectious diseases.

1. Make disinfectant wipes, preferably with bleach, your best friend. According to the Wall Street Journal, the average desk has over 800 bacteria per square inch – roughly 14 times more bacteria than an office toilet seat. Keep a canister of wipes at your desk and start the work day by wiping all surfaces, in particular the keyboard, mouse, desktop, chair arms, phone and headset. Pay particular attention to the mouthpiece of the phone or headset. Once it is wiped down, wait 3-5 minutes for the disinfectants to dry and kill any pathogens.
2. Get vaccinated. While some employers require vaccines, many others are choosing to educate employees about the health benefits of the vaccine instead. According to the World Health Organization, vaccinated people have milder symptoms and are far less likely to experience severe illness or death. Getting vaccinated can keep you out of the hospital and put less stress on our already overburdened healthcare system.
3. Wear a mask. The mask that offers the most protection is the N95 or KN95 because it protects you from 95% of particles in the air, including Omicron. If you can't find one of these masks, opt for layering two surgical masks or a surgical mask with a cloth mask on top. Masks should be worn at all times, especially in meetings, common gathering spaces, elevators and the bathroom. Correct and consistent mask use can substantially reduce the risk of getting and spreading COVID-19. Wearing a mask is even more important now that easy spreading variants, like Omicron, are more dominant across the country.

4. Wash your hands frequently with soap and warm water and use disinfectant with at least 60 percent alcohol when you can. The CDC recommends washing your hands for 20 seconds, especially after going to the bathroom, before eating and after blowing your nose, sneezing or coughing. After you wash, don't touch your face, rub your eyes or bite your nails. According to a 2015 study in the American Journal of Infection Control, people touch their faces approximately 20 times per hour. The eyes and mouth are areas where viruses can easily enter the body and repeated touching of the face can significantly increase infection risk. Wearing glasses or gloves can help break the habit as can mindful hand washing and disinfection.
  
5. Good ventilation is key! Find out how often the ventilation system in your building completely blows out indoor air and replaces it with fresh air from outside. Ideally, the air in the office is being replaced every 15-20 minutes. Many employers opt for a continuous, nontoxic disinfection device in the HVAC system. These devices operate 24/7 to deactivate viruses in the air and reduce bioburden on surfaces to near zero. These technologies are already used in professional sports teams' locker rooms, manufacturing facilities and hospitals. Still want more protection? Consider purchasing your own portable air filter. HEPA filters can be purchased for around \$200-300 and can filter a small room. A recent CDC study found that HEPA air filters reduced the aerosol exposure of people in a room up to 65 percent. (Adding masks in addition to the filters reduced exposure by up to 90 percent.)