

CDC's New Definition of "Close Contact" Impacts Contact Tracing in Workplaces



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On October 21, 2020, the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention ("CDC") expanded the definition of "close contact" for contact tracing purposes. The CDC previously defined close contact as 15 consecutive minutes within six feet of an infected person. The [new definition](#) still uses 15 minutes as the key time period but includes shorter, repeat exposures that add up to 15 minutes over a period of 24 hours: "Someone who was within 6 feet of an infected person for a cumulative total of 15 minutes or more over a 24-hour period starting from 2 days before illness onset (or, for asymptomatic patients, 2 days prior to test specimen collection) until the time the patient is isolated." Whether cloth face coverings or respiratory personal protective equipment ("PPE") were involved does not matter for purposes of determining who has been in close contact with an infected person.

The new definition changes the way employers identify workplace close contacts in response to learning of an infected person in the workplace. It is likely that more "exposures" will result from application of the new definition. For example, when considering an infected worker's interactions with others in the workplace, an employer must take into account a co-worker who stopped by the infected worker's desk and talked three different times during the day for approximately five minutes each time. Before, this talkative co-worker was not considered to have been exposed to COVID-19 and their interactions with the infected person required no response from the employer under [CDC guidelines](#). Now, most employers (depending on the type of workplace) will need to inform the talkative co-worker of their exposure and ask them to stay home for 14 days, self-monitor for symptoms and telework if possible.

The Mitchell Williams Employment Law team regularly advises employers on how to mitigate the impacts of COVID-19 in their workforce. Contact Attorney Nate Read at nread@mwlaw.com or Attorney Lauren Grinder at lgrinder@mwlaw.com for more information.