

*Editor's Note: Safety Group Program Monthly Newsletter Article — Sept. 2020*  
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## The aging workforce: Protecting older workers in the age of COVID-19

People age 65 and over represent the fastest-growing workforce segment from 2014 to 2024, according to the U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics, which projects their employment will surge by more than 50%. Colorado's over-65 population is [growing in size faster than in all but two other states](#).

These older workers bring experience, maturity and knowledge to their jobs. They are also at higher risk of becoming seriously ill from COVID-19, [according to the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention](#), with [those over 65 five to 13 times](#) more likely than adults 18-29 to be hospitalized by the virus.

Those over 65 have higher incidences of preexisting conditions that make them more vulnerable to COVID-19, such as cardiovascular disease, diabetes and hypertension. So how can businesses keep these workers safe?

In June, the Equal Employment Opportunity Commission said businesses could “provide flexibility” for workers over 65 to help protect these individuals from COVID-19. Yet employers also must be careful of ageism, as changes meant to protect older workers can sometimes be viewed as discriminatory.

Before making adjustments that impact only older workers, supervisors should talk to them to gauge their preferences. The workers may embrace the offers, or they may not want to be treated differently.

Remember, adding precautions for older workers can also help protect the entire staff amidst the pandemic. Here are 10 tips for keeping older workers safe during the COVID-19 era.

1. **Always wear masks.** Complying with the [governor's mask mandate](#), which mandates masks be worn in all indoor spaces, could slow the spread of COVID-19. Make sure younger employees wear the masks too — masks don't protect the person wearing them, but rather those around them, trapping droplets that escape from mouths and noses that could pass on the virus.
2. **Conduct employee screenings.** All businesses with more than 50 employees in one location must screen employees for symptoms. Set up a screening station or create a business policy that requires at-home employee self-screening each workday and reporting results to the employer prior to entering the worksite. Send home anyone with symptoms such as a fever of 100.4 degrees Fahrenheit or above, cough, shortness of breath, sore throat, nausea or vomiting. [Download the employee health screening tool](#).

3. **Tell sick workers to take sick days.** Many people don't want to miss a day of work since it could also mean less pay or losing a chance to earn tips or incentives. But protecting older workers means keeping them away from people who might have the virus, so urge workers exhibiting COVID-19 symptoms to stay home.
4. **Adjust working hours and locations.** Allow older employees to cover their shifts earlier or later in the day, so they're exposed to fewer people, or let them work from home, if possible.
5. **Change duties.** Let older employees switch to back-office jobs where they interact with fewer people, but present this change as a choice. Some workers may enjoy their current positions and not want to change.
6. **Assist with transportation.** If older workers usually ride to work using public transit, where they could be exposed to someone with coronavirus, discuss facilitating a different option.
7. **Post signs reminding everyone to wash their hands frequently.** Allow employees to take regular breaks for handwashing.
8. **Disinfect surfaces between shifts.** Deep-clean frequently touched surfaces such as doorknobs, phones, keyboards, sinks, faucets and toilets.
9. **Let employees work outside when possible.** Transmission risk is lower outside, and some tasks can be performed outdoors well into the fall.
10. **Hold meetings virtually.** Even if the whole workforce is back at the office, avoid gatherings with lots of people in one room, making social distancing difficult. If in-person meetings must take place, don't serve food, as masks can't be worn while eating.

Have questions? [Contact a Pinnacol safety consultant](#) to discuss how to protect older workers during the pandemic.

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