

What doctors want patients to know about going back to work

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Sara Berg, MS

News Editor

Workplaces across the country continue to map out their back-to-the-office plans as the COVID-19 pandemic endures. After more than a year out of the office, returning to work faces some challenges, including what that workplace will look like and how to protect employees as the [dangerous Delta variant](#) continues to spread.

“It seemed that as vaccination efforts were underway that people were already starting to return to work, but then I heard that a lot of companies are now delaying it because of these new variants and surges in various places of the country,” said AMA member Purvi Parikh, MD, an allergist and immunologist as well as a vaccine researcher in New York City. “It’s just like everything in this pandemic. Unfortunately, it might be a regional or a case-by-case thing because in certain regions it may be easier to return to work in the fall.

“Whereas if you’re in an area of the country that’s having a peak of these COVID cases, they may defer it for longer,” Dr. Parikh added.

For those who do have a looming return-to-work date, Dr. Parikh shares what patients should know about transitioning back to work as the pandemic continues.

Workplaces will look different

When returning to work, it may be more common to see workplaces take on hybrid models with some days in the office and other days working from home.

That means workplaces will look a lot different than before the pandemic began “and that might be permanent,” said Dr. Parikh. “If we can’t get past this pandemic and variants keep

popping up, it means work as we know it might change forever.”

There may be vaccine mandates

“Something I’ve been seeing is more and more companies are mandating vaccinations,” said Dr. Parikh, adding “that will play a big role because I think the companies that mandate the vaccinations likely will have a sooner return to work than others.

“A few of my patients already told me that they will get vaccinated against COVID-19 if they were told they’d get fired if they didn’t get vaccinated,” she said.

COVID-19 variants remain a concern

“The Delta variant right now is the biggest worry, but Lambda is not too far behind,” Dr. Parikh explained, noting that the Lambda variant is “already kind of taken over South America and Peru.”

Additionally, “there’s already some concerns that the vaccine is not as efficacious against the Lambda variant,” she said. “Basically, the bottom line is we should be worried about it. It’s not what’s immediately in front of us, but it may be very soon.”

The concern is because “Delta came and spread quickly, so we don’t want to get to the point where Lambda is one that the vaccine is potentially not as efficacious,” Dr. Parikh said. “Because then we’re all in trouble.”

Discover [what doctors want patients to know about the dangerous Delta variant](https://patients.ama-assn.org/public-health/infectious-diseases/what-doctors-want-patients-know-about-going-back-work).

Dust off that social rust

With some employees heading back to the office, even though they have anticipated this for more than a year, it can also cause a lot of stress. That’s why it is important to brush off that social rust, which is natural after dealing with uncertainty about your health, safety, work and social life, and more.

“Basically, we have to get back to work because the longer you delay going back, that social rust gets worse,” said Dr. Parikh. “We’re already seeing it in air travel. Incidents on airplanes and violence on airplanes is up about 84%.

“It is an interesting concept and doing the hybrid work model might help, but with the social rust—because you’re only spending a few days at a time initially with people—you cannot tell if you can tolerate them again.”

“The longer we delay, it’ll only be worse and stranger to go back to work,” Dr. Parikh said.

Schedule a time to catch up

When in the office, it might be a good idea to schedule an initial meeting to catch up with coworkers.

“It can’t hurt to schedule time to catch up with coworkers as long as it’s being done responsibly,” said Dr. Parikh. That means wearing masks and practicing physical distancing.

If proper prevention measures are followed, then “by all means do it—it might help cut down on some of those distractions of seeing people for the first time in over a year,” she said.

Wear masks in the office

“As we head into fall and winter, it’s going to be masks now for the rest of the year because these respiratory viruses only get worse as the weather gets colder,” Dr. Parikh explained, noting that it is “because we’re spending more time indoors—that’s why flu season is fall and winter, even though the flu virus is around all year.

“That’s why I would recommend getting used to wearing the mask because indoors people are going to have to wear it—whether they’re vaccinated or not—with these variants, unless you’re at home or with people who you know very well.”

Learn more from the AMA about [CDC's latest mask guidance](#).

Assess your risk profile

It's the same with using public transportation for work—everyone should wear a mask and practice physical distancing.

“If you're vaccinated and you're masking—or even double masking—then by all means take public transportation to work,” said Dr. Parikh. “But everyone has to assess their own risk profile. For a young 25-year-old, the risk of public transportation is very different than a 70-year-old with multiple medical problems.

“Or the opposite end, for a young child who has not been vaccinated, it might be a lot more dangerous for that child,” she added. “You have to tailor it to your own risk profile and do it responsibly if you do it because you can't really distance in public transportation, so you have to mask or double mask.”

Discover [what doctors want patients to know about double masking](#).

Practice physical distancing

Maintaining [physical distancing](#) in office buildings is also important “because indoors is where the spread is most dangerous,” Dr. Parikh explained. “The physical distancing is still important even with the masks and vaccines.”

“You still have to be more careful” because breakthrough infections can happen,” she added, noting that it also helps in “protecting others who may not have responded to the vaccine or haven't received the vaccine yet,” such as [immunocompromised patients](#).

Read about [what doctors want patients to know about breakthrough COVID infections](#).

Follow common sense measures

Knowing what is safe to do when in the office is also important. For example, “you can take off your mask if you have your own office and you’re the only one in there with the doors closed,” said Dr. Parikh, emphasizing that, if possible, “it’s very safe to obviously keep windows open and encourage it if you can because that helps the air ventilation if it’s not too cold.

“And then with eating, I would only really remove masks within the office—especially if you’re around others,” she added. “Try to eat and drink away from other people—a good six-to-10-foot distance—or even on your own if you can.”

“It’s OK to socialize and mingle with the masks on, but follow common sense measures,” Dr. Parikh said, noting that this means “frequent hand-washing, not touching your face, don’t share stuff with people and practice wiping down common surfaces.”

Stay home when sick

Another vital piece for keeping everyone safe when returning to work is “don’t come to work sick,” said Dr. Parikh. In fact, “don’t come to work even if you have a mild case of anything because it could be something severe—there’s no way to know for sure what you actually have.”

“Wearing masks will help with that too,” she said. That’s because “even if people do not stay home when they are sick, the masks will cut down on that spread of illness, so that’s good.”

Get the flu vaccine this fall

Like last year, it is still important to also make sure to get the flu vaccine.

“Everyone should get their flu shot as soon as it’s available because the last thing you’d want is to get the flu while also dealing with the COVID-19 pandemic,” said Dr. Parikh. “Our systems are already overwhelmed but add in the flu and it will make things worse.”

Discover [eight things doctors want patients to know about flu shots](#).

Keep your vaccine card handy

With many employers requiring COVID-19 vaccination before returning to work, make sure your vaccine card is easily accessible, “or at least have a photo of it,” said Dr. Parikh, noting that she made a color photocopy of her COVID-19 vaccine card just in case.

Discover [six things to tell patients about their COVID-19 vaccine card](#).