OSHA Training Toolbox Talk: Biological Hazards – Common Signs and Symptoms of Infection

[Reference: Paragraph (5)(a)(1) of OSHA Act of 1970 / Centers for Disease Control & Prevention (CDC) Guidelines]

There are several common signs and symptoms that present themselves when the human body's immune system is trying to fight off an infection. Experiencing one or more of these signs or symptoms may be an early indication that you, or someone else displaying them, are potentially infected with a contagious virus, bacteria, or other biological agent.

- **Runny or Congested Nose** – The human body naturally creates mucus to trap irritants, allergens, and infectious agents that enter the body through the nose and other openings. And when the foreign bodies increase in number, such as when some viruses attach to cells that mutate and begin to duplicate, the human body generates even more mucus, literally trying to trap and flush the infectious agent out of the body through your sinuses and nose.
- **Coughing and Sneezing** – Mucus built up in your respiratory tract may thicken and change color from clear to yellow or light green, a possible sign of infection. As thick mucus, or phlegm, builds up, your body tries to expel it by coughing and sneezing.
- **Fever** – Many viruses, including influenza and the Corona virus, are sensitive to heat and cannot survive above-normal body temperatures for an extended period of time. So, your body purposely raises its own temperature to try and weaken or destroy the infectious agent.
- **Muscle and Joint Pain** – Your immune system signals white blood cells to create various chemicals to fight off an infection caused by various agents. In many cases, these chemicals also cause inflammation in your muscles and joints, resulting in them feeling sore or achy.
- **Vomiting or Diarrhea** – When certain bacteria, viruses, or parasites get inside your stomach, they can cause irritation of your stomach lining and intestines. Ingesting food or beverages can further irritate your stomach, which responds by trying to expel its contents by vomiting. Sometimes the irritation is so severe that you continue trying to vomit even after your stomach is empty of its contents, a reflex condition known as the dry heaves. And when certain infectious agents upset your gut, your body may try to expel the contents by redirecting water from other parts of your body into your bowels, essentially trying to flush them out via a runny, watery stool.

These are some of the most common signs and symptoms signaling your body may be trying to fight off a contagious infection, although it's possible these could be attributed to some other disorder. And some infections may present unique signs or symptoms (***NOTE:*** *reference the CDC handout for symptoms of Corona-19 and Influenza viruses, discuss similarities and differences*). But regardless, if a person is experiencing one or more of these signs or symptoms persistently, or if the effects of the symptoms are severe, that person should avoid being around others and arrange to obtain a proper diagnosis from a medical professional as soon as possible.

Are there any questions about today's toolbox talk on common signs and symptoms of infections? Thank you for your attendance, and please take a moment to sign your name on the training certification form to get credit for attending today's toolbox training session.

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COVID-19 vs Flu

	COVID-19	Flu
Fever/chills	✓ Common	✓ Common
Cough	✓ Common	✓ Common
Body Aches/ Headache	✓ Common	✓ Common
Tiredness	✓ Common	✓ Common
Loss of taste/smell	✓ Common	✗ Not Common
Runny/stuffy nose	⊖ Less Common	⊖ Less Common
Sore throat	⊖ Less Common	⊖ Less Common
Shortness of breath	✓ Common	⊖ Less Common
Severity	Varies. Older adults and people with certain underlying conditions are at higher risk of severe illness. Seems to cause more severe illness in more people than flu.	Varies. Young children, older adults, and people with certain chronic conditions are at higher risk of severe illness.
Onset of symptoms	Later (2-14 days after infection)	Earlier (1-4 days after infection)
Cause	SARS-CoV-2	Influenza viruses

CDC

cdc.gov/coronavirus

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