OSHA Training Toolbox Talk: Biological Hazards – The Hidden Transmitters of Infectious Diseases

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

If a person nearby were persistently coughing, sneezing, and sweating profusely, you would probably suspect they may be suffering from a potentially infectious disease such as the flu, especially if there has been a recent outbreak in your area. And as a result, you would probably take steps to avoid being near that person for fear of contracting the infectious agent that caused their suspected disease. Conversely, you would probably, or at least hopefully, avoid being around other people if you yourself were exhibiting the signs and symptoms of a potentially infectious disease, so as to avoid infecting others.

But what if you or someone else was carrying an infectious virus or bacterium that causes a contagious disease, but you, or they, showed absolutely no signs of having been infected? There are actually two different ways this could happen, and they both present a real dilemma in our efforts to prevent the spread of infection from one person to another.

An **Asymptomatic** person is someone who has contracted an infection, and displays absolutely no signs of suffering from the infection. Or, the signs and symptoms are so slight that infection is not suspected. Similarly, a person who is **Pre-symptomatic** may have contracted an infectious disease that takes several days for signs or symptoms to be displayed, yet they can still spread the infection to other people during that interim period. Both of these types of individuals can be problematic in spreading infections to others. In fact, the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, or CDC, estimates that almost half of all transmissions of the Corona virus that causes Covid-19 are attributed to people who are Asymptomatic or Pre-symptomatic.

Here is a partial list with a few more common viruses and bacteria which can be spread, to some degree, by people who are Asymptomatic or Pre-symptomatic:

- Cholera
- Flu, or Influenza
- Hepatitis
- Herpes
- HIV, which causes AIDS
- Measles
- Rubella
- Tuberculosis
- Rhinoviruses, which cause the common cold

The point of this toolbox talk is to help us understand that any one of us might be carrying an infectious virus or bacteria without showing any signs or symptoms of infection. Therefore, we should all be active participants in taking the steps necessary to help stop the spread of infectious diseases. And that includes following recommended protocols such as wearing a face mask and practicing social distancing that are designed to prevent the transmission of infectious diseases during an outbreak or pandemic, even though we may not think we are infectious!

Are there any questions about today's toolbox talk discussing how Asymptomatic and Pre-symptomatic individuals can still spread infectious viruses and bacteria, even though they may not feel the effects of an infection? Thank you for your attendance, and please sign your name on the training certification form to get credit for attending today's toolbox training session.

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