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CDC Revises Definition of “Close Contact” for COVID-19 Exposure

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Since the early days of the pandemic, employers have relied on the CDC’s definition of “close contact” to inform workplace COVID-19 exposure protocol. That definition has now changed.

The CDC’s prior definition stated that “close contact” occurred when an individual was within 6 feet or less of an infected person for at least 15 **continuous** minutes.

Now, the CDC defines “close contact” as follows:

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.

Small incremental exposure periods are now added together over a 24-hour period to meet the cumulative 15-minute exposure benchmark for “close contact.” For example, an employee who has three 5-minute exposures to a COVID-19 positive co-worker within 24 hours now meets the cumulative 15-minute “close contact” definition.

Employers need to amend their COVID-19-related policies and exposure protocols to account for the CDC’s new “close contact” definition. This broader definition will likely increase the number of employees who are considered to have had “close contact” with an infected co-worker and will likely result in more employees being required to quarantine.

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For questions regarding COVID-19 workplace exposure or the CDC’s expanded guidance, contact Amy Angel or Daniel Walker at 503-228-0500, or at aangel@barran.com or dwalker@barran.com.