

HR Insights

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How Natural Immunity to COVID-19 Might Factor Into Vaccine Mandates

Recently, President Joe Biden announced sweeping COVID-19 vaccination mandates. Federal employees must now be vaccinated as a condition of employment. And, soon, private employers with 100 or more employees will need to implement the same measure or allow weekly negative COVID-19 testing as substitutes for vaccination.

Little is currently known about the upcoming emergency temporary standard (ETS) that will apply to private employers. The Occupational Safety and Health Administration (OSHA), the agency tasked with drafting the rule, has yet to release any specific details.

This lack of clarity has led to quite a bit of confusion among business leaders. Namely, organizations want to know which exceptions there may be to the ETS requirements. For example, exceptions may include sincerely held religious beliefs or disabilities that prevent immunization.

However, employers also want to know about less common exceptions that some employees may request, which could factor into the upcoming ETS—namely, natural immunity.

This article discusses what natural immunity is, why it's a relevant conversation point and how it may play a role in the yet-to-be-released ETS.

Natural Immunity, Explained

Natural immunity is the term used for the indefinite period of time after COVID-19 infection where an

individual is “immune” from contracting the disease again, similar to how people only contract chickenpox once in their lives—except the protection from COVID-19 doesn't appear to last forever.

The question among some is, “Once an individual is infected with COVID-19, do they need to get vaccinated or is their immunity sufficient?”

How Natural Immunity Factors Into the ETS

From a practical perspective, making an exception for naturally immune employees would be problematic. It would be virtually impossible to verify if each person maintained the right number of antibodies that prevent COVID-19 reinfection. Employers would need to review each employee's situation individually and likely require a doctor to weigh in on each case.

Furthermore, when it comes to COVID-19, health experts still don't know how long natural immunity lasts or how much protection it offers [compared to vaccination](#). **Therefore, most experts predict the ETS will not include it as an exception for getting vaccinated.**

It's also worth noting that the Center for Disease Control and Prevention recommends that all eligible people get vaccinated against COVID-19 regardless of whether they've been infected before.



What to Expect in the Upcoming ETS

The ETS is still being drafted and will be released in the coming weeks or months. Until then, employers will be left guessing the mandate's specifics.

However, at this point, experts predict that the ETS will not outline natural immunity as a valid exception to the rule.

Conclusion

Stay tuned for more updates on the upcoming ETS, including how it may affect your workplace. In the meantime, organizations should begin planning ahead and thinking about how their businesses intend to enforce the mandate. For example, will it require vaccinations for everyone or allow negative COVID-19 testing as an alternative?

Continue to monitor not only federal law but your state and local laws as well, and reach out today for more on the upcoming OSHA ETS.