

Infectious Diseases on the Jobsite

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The past two years have witnessed an increase in awareness about the risks - and tragedies - associated with a public health crisis. The impact has been monumental and measurable in so many ways. How ironic that the hazard we cannot see can have such a widespread and long-lasting impact on our economies, our cultures, and our lives.

So it goes with infectious diseases; sometimes the invisible can do the most harm. This is true both in the home and in the workplace. Construction jobsites are susceptible to three types of threats:

- **Fungi – spore-producing organisms that feed on organic matter**
- **Bacteria – microscopic living organisms that can be found anywhere**
- **Viruses – infective agents within living cells of a host organism**

In the construction industry, exposure to mould (a fungus) is a primary concern. The prevention challenge is great, however, because mould is everywhere, including in the air, in soils, and in building materials. And while the environment will never be mould-free, residential and commercial projects should be free from visible and odor-producing mould. When inhaled or ingested, fungi presents a health concern especially to persons who are immune compromised.

Bacteria are living organisms that also are a threat to construction employees because they are contagious, most often by air (e.g., tuberculosis), water (e.g., Legionnaires' disease), and point-of-contact (e.g., tetanus). Preventative measures can be implemented on jobsites to reduce these risks of infection. However, even in the most active of work zones, these threats are highest to those with compromised immune systems.

Unlike bacteria, viruses are not living organisms, but they still present a significant risk to workers via bloodborne or airborne exposure. COVID-19 is the most common present-day example, but not the only one of this kind of infectious disease. Others include influenza, measles, polio, hepatitis, and rabies. Due to the communal nature of construction work and the reliance upon close, personal interaction, the threat of virus infections is real - and ongoing - especially for “novel” (i.e., new) strains, such as the coronavirus.

