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Employment and Labour unveils guidelines dealing with Coronavirus Covid-19 at workplaces

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Department of Employment and Labour unveil guidelines to deal with Covid-19 at workplaces

The Department of Employment and Labour has appealed to employers to use the prescriptions of the Occupational Health and Safety (OHS) Act of 1993 in governing workplaces in relation to Coronavirus Disease 2019 COVID-19.

The OHS read with the Hazardous Biological Agents Regulations requires the employer to provide and maintain as far as is reasonably practicable a working environment that is safe and without risks to the health of employees.

“Section 8(2)(b) requires steps such as may be reasonably practicable to eliminate or mitigate any hazard or potential hazard before resorting to personal protective equipment (PPE). However, in the case of COVID-19, a combination of controls is required, although the main principle is to follow the hierarchy of controls.

“However, before the implementation of control measures, current risk assessments need to be reviewed and updated, taking into account the new hazards posed by exposure to COVID-19 in the workplace. This is in accordance with Section 8 (2) (d) of the OHS Act”.

The Department wishes to appeal to employers who have not prepared for pandemic events to prepare themselves and their workers as far in advance as possible of potentially worsening outbreak conditions. The Department advises employers to “go back to basics” by conducting hazard identification and risk assessment to determine the level of risk exposure and communicate to all workers.

As of 09 March 2020, corona virus infections had spread to eight new countries – increasing to 102 countries affected worldwide.

Coronaviruses are a group of viruses that cause diseases in mammals and birds. In humans, coronaviruses cause respiratory tract infections in nose, sinuses or upper throat. Symptoms of the virus include fever, cough, and shortness of breath.

The Department has developed a COVID-19 guideline. This COVID-19 planning guidance was developed based on traditional infection prevention and occupational hygiene practices. It focuses on the need for employers to implement the following:

- Engineering controls - isolating employees from work-related hazards, installing high-efficiency air filters, increasing ventilation rates in the work environment and installing physical barriers such as face shields to provide ventilation.
- Administrative controls – these controls require action by the employee and employer. Examples of administrative controls include: encouraging sick workers to stay at home; minimizing contact among workers, clients and customers by replacing face-to-face meetings with virtual communications e.g. conference calls, Skype, etc.; minimising the number of workers on site at any given time e.g. rotation or shift work; discontinuing nonessential local and international travel; regularly check travel advice from the Department of Health at: www.health.gov.za; developing emergency communications plans, including a task team for answering workers' concerns and internet-based communications, if feasible, providing workers with up-to-date education and training on COVID-19 risk factors and protective behaviours

(e.g. cough etiquette and care of PPE); training workers who need to use protective clothing and equipment on how to put it on, use/wear it and take it off correctly, including in the context of their current and potential duties. Training material should be easy to understand and available in the appropriate language and literacy level for all workers.

- Safe Work Practices – these include procedures for safe and proper work used to reduce the duration, frequency, or intensity of exposure to a hazard. Provide resources and a work environment that promotes personal hygiene. For example, no-touch refuse bins, hand soap, alcohol-based hand rubs containing at least 70 percent alcohol, disinfectants, and disposable towels for workers to clean their hands and their work surfaces, regular hand washing or using of alcohol-based hand rubs, and display handwashing signs in restrooms.
- Personal Protective Equipment (PPE) – while engineering and administrative controls are considered more effective in minimizing exposure to SARS-CoV-2, PPE may also be needed to prevent certain exposures. Examples of PPE include: gloves, goggles, face shields, face masks, gowns, aprons, coats, overalls, hair and shoe covers and respiratory protection, when appropriate. Employers should check the NICD website regularly for updates about recommended PPE.

Employers and workers should use this planning guidance to help identify risk levels in workplace settings and to determine any appropriate control measures to implement. Additional guidance may be needed as COVID-19 outbreak conditions change. In the event that new information about the virus, its transmission, and impact, becomes available you may have to modify your plans accordingly.

For employers who have already planned for influenza outbreaks involving many staff members, planning for COVID-19 may involve updating plans to address the specific exposure risks, sources of exposure, routes of transmission, and other unique characteristics of respiratory infections (i.e., compared to influenza virus outbreaks).

In the case of suspected exposure contact the coronavirus hotline in South Africa: 0800 02 9999

The Department of Employment and Labour will for now keep its labour centres opened. The Department has put in place a Crisis Management Team which will be guided by the Department's business continuity plan. The Crisis Management Team will meet every day at 09h00 to assess the situation and put measures in place to promote health and safety of staff and its clients.

The queues at labour centres and services provided will be managed to adhere to the 100 people not gathering in one place at the same time.

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