

COVID-19: guidance for the workplace

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Background and scope of guidance

On 11th March 2020 the World Health Organization (WHO) declared the coronavirus COVID-19 outbreak as pandemic. The European Commission is working together with the WHO and Member State public health authorities to contain the COVID-19 outbreak. In the EU, the European Centre for Disease Prevention and Control (ECDC) (<https://www.ecdc.europa.eu/en/novel-coronavirus-china>) is closely monitoring this outbreak and providing risk assessments to guide EU Member States and the EU Commission in their response activities.

However, long-term success cannot be taken for granted. All sections of our society – including businesses and employers – must play a role if we are to stop the spread of this disease. This guidance will assist employers and businesses in providing advice to staff in non-healthcare settings on:

- the novel coronavirus, COVID-19
- how to help prevent spread of respiratory infections including COVID-19
- what to do if someone with suspected or confirmed to have COVID-19 has been in the workplace
- advice on travel and meetings
- further information and resources

Use only guidance from reputable sources to determine risk of COVID-19. Do not make determinations of risk based on race or country of origin; be sure to maintain confidentiality of people with confirmed COVID-19; and be aware of persons who may be at particular risk (i.e. those aged over 60, have an underlying condition or chronic disease, or who are pregnant).

The novel coronavirus, COVID-19

Information about the virus

As a group, coronaviruses are common across the world. COVID-19 is a new strain of coronavirus first identified in Wuhan City, China in January 2020.

Currently, the incubation period of COVID-19 is assessed to be between 2 and 14 days. This means that if a person remains well 14 days after contact with someone with confirmed coronavirus, they have not been infected.

Regularly updated information on COVID-19 is available from ECDC (<https://www.ecdc.europa.eu/en/novel-coronavirus-china>) and your national authorities.

Signs and symptoms of COVID-19

The following symptoms may develop in the 14 days after exposure to someone who has COVID-19 infection:

- dry cough
- sore throat
- difficulty in breathing
- tiredness
- fever



Generally, these infections can cause more severe symptoms in people with weakened immune systems, older people, and those with long-term conditions like diabetes, cancer and chronic lung disease.

How COVID-19 is spread

From what we know about other coronaviruses, spread of COVID-19 is most likely to happen when there is close contact (2 metres or less) with an infected person. It is likely that the risk increases the longer someone has close contact with an infected person.

Droplets produced when an infected person coughs or sneezes containing the virus are the main means of transmission.

There are two main routes by which people can spread COVID-19:

- infection can be spread to people who are nearby (within 2 metres) such that droplets could be inhaled into the lungs.
- it is also possible that someone may become infected by touching a surface, object or the hand of an infected person that has been contaminated with respiratory secretions and then touching their own mouth, nose, or eyes (such as touching door knob or shaking hands then touching own face)

How long the virus can survive

How long any respiratory virus survives will depend on a number of factors, for example:

- what surface the virus is on
- whether it is exposed to sunlight
- differences in temperature and humidity
- exposure to cleaning products

Under most circumstances, the amount of infectious virus on any contaminated surfaces is likely to decrease significantly over 72 hours.

We know that similar viruses are transferred to and by people's hands. Therefore, regular hand hygiene and cleaning of frequently touched surfaces will help to reduce the risk of infection.

How to help prevent spread of respiratory infections including COVID-19

Getting your workplace ready in case COVID-19 arrives in your community

Develop a contingency and business continuity plan for an outbreak in the communities where your business operates.



- The plan will help prepare your organisation for the possibility of an outbreak of COVID-19 in its workplaces or community. It may also be valid for other health emergencies.
- The plan should address how to keep your business running even if a significant number of workers, contractors and suppliers cannot come to your place of business – either due to local restrictions on travel or because they are ill.
- Inform your workers and their representatives as well as your contractors about the plan and make sure they are aware of what they need to do – or not do – under the plan. Emphasise key points such as the importance of staying away from work even if they have only mild symptoms or have had to take simple medication (e.g. paracetamol, ibuprofen) which may mask the symptoms.
- Be sure your plan addresses sick leave arrangements (see #Certifying absence from work), and the mental health and social consequences of a case of COVID-19 in the workplace or in the community and offer information and support.
- For small and medium-sized businesses without in-house occupational health support, consult the information available online from your occupational health service, public health and labour authorities in advance of any emergency. Consult any guidance given by your sectoral organisations (employers' associations, chambers of commerce, sectoral social services).

Preventing spread of infection

There is currently no vaccine to prevent COVID-19. The best way to prevent infection is to avoid being exposed to the virus. Prevention measures such as those described below should be taken now, even if COVID-19 countermeasures are not in place in your community. The measures should be included in the workplace risk assessment that covers all risks, including those caused by biological agents, as set out in EU and national occupational health and safety legislation.

Employers should:

- Place posters that encourage staying home when sick, cough and sneeze etiquette, and hand hygiene at the entrance to the workplace and in other areas where they will be seen.
- Provide workers with tissues and waste bins lined with a plastic bag so that they can be emptied without contacting the contents.
- Instruct workers to clean their hands frequently, using soap and water for at least 20 seconds or with an alcohol-based hand sanitiser that contains at least 60-95% alcohol.
- Provide soap and water and alcohol-based hand rubs in the workplace in multiple locations and in common areas to encourage hand hygiene.
- Continue routine environmental cleaning and consider additional measures as described later in this document.
- Brief the workers, contractors and customers that anyone with even a mild cough or low-grade fever (37.3 C or more) needs to stay at home. They should also stay home (or work from home) if they have had to take simple medications, such as paracetamol/acetaminophen, ibuprofen or aspirin, which may mask symptoms of infection
- Any workers who develops flu-like symptoms (i.e. cough, shortness of breath, fever) should go home immediately and contact the public health service. If there is any reason to suspect that they may have been in contact with COVID-19, then follow the measures described in #What to do if an employee or a member of the public becomes unwell and believe they have been exposed to COVID-19.

If it is feasible for your business, promote teleworking across your organisation and allow workers to work flexible hours to minimise crowding the workplace. As part of the COVID-19 countermeasures in your community, the health authorities may advise people to avoid public transport and crowded places. Teleworking will help your business keep operating while your workers stay safe.

Routine environmental cleaning:

- Routinely clean all frequently touched surfaces in the workplace, such as workstations, countertops, and door handles. Use the cleaning agents that are usually used in these areas and follow the directions on the label.
- No additional disinfection beyond routine cleaning is recommended at this time.

- Provide disposable wipes so that commonly used surfaces (for example, doorknobs, keyboards, remote controls, desks) can be wiped down by workers.

Guidance on facemasks

Workers are not generally recommended to wear facemasks (also known as surgical masks or respirators) to protect against the virus. Other than specific groups, such as healthcare workers, facemasks are only recommended for symptomatic individuals to reduce the risk of transmitting the infection to other people.

The best way to reduce any risk of infection is good hygiene and avoiding direct or close contact (closer than 2 metres) with any potentially infected person. Any worker who deals with members of the public from behind a screen should be protected from airborne particles.

What to do if someone with suspected or confirmed to have COVID-19 has been in the workplace

What to do if a worker or a member of the public becomes unwell and believe they have been exposed to COVID-19

If someone becomes unwell in the workplace and there is reason to suspect they may have come into contact with COVID-19, the person should be removed to an area which is at least 2 metres away from other people. If possible, find a room or area where they can be isolated behind a closed door, such as a staff office. If possible open a window for ventilation.

The individual who is unwell should use their mobile phone to call the designated public health service number. If it is an emergency (if they are seriously ill or injured or their life is at risk) then you should call 112 and explain the situation and relevant information, such as their current symptoms.

Whilst waiting for advice from the designated public health or emergency service, the affected person should remain at least two metres from other people. They should avoid touching people, surfaces and objects and should cover their mouth and nose with a disposable tissue when they cough or sneeze and put the tissue in a bag or pocket then throw the tissue in the bin. If they do not have any tissues available, they should cough and sneeze into the crook of their elbow.

If they need to go to the bathroom whilst waiting for medical assistance, they should use a separate bathroom if available.

Consider identifying persons who have conditions that put them at higher risk of serious illness (older people (>60 years) and those with chronic conditions (including hypertension, lung or heart problems, diabetes, or who are undergoing cancer treatment or some other immunosuppression) and pregnant workers) and advising them to take additional precautions, such as staying at home.

What to do if a member of staff or the public with suspected COVID-19 has recently been in your workplace

For contacts of a suspected case in the workplace, follow the guidance given by your national authorities. The management team of the office or workplace will be contacted by the designated public health services to discuss the case, to identify people who have been in contact with them and to advise on any actions or precautions that should be taken.

A risk assessment of each situation will be undertaken by the designated public health services with the lead responsible person in your workplace. They will provide advice on how to manage staff and members of the public, based on their assessment of the risk.

The designated public health services will also be in contact with the affected person directly to advise on isolation and identifying other contacts to whom they will give appropriate advice.

If a worker is confirmed to have COVID-19, employers should inform fellow workers of their possible exposure to COVID-19 in the workplace but maintain confidentiality.

Workers exposed to a co-worker with confirmed COVID-19 should be given instructions on what to do according to your company policies and the national authorities' guidance.

Advice on cleaning of communal areas such as offices or toilets will be given by designated public health services (see #Cleaning offices and public spaces where there are suspected or confirmed cases of COVID-19).

Workers who are well but who have a sick family member at home with COVID-19 should notify their employer and refer to national health services guidance as to how to assess their potential exposure and the measures to take.

When individuals in the workplace have had contact with a confirmed case of COVID-19

If a confirmed case is identified in your workplace, the designated public health services will provide advice to:

- any worker that has been in close face-to-face or touching contact
- anyone who has spent any length of time with the worker while he or she was symptomatic
- anyone who has cleaned up any bodily fluids
- close friendship groups or workgroups
- any worker living in the same household as a confirmed case

Contacts are not considered cases and if they are feeling well, they are very unlikely to have spread the infection to others:

- those who have had close contact will be asked to self-isolate at home for 14 days from the last time they had contact with the confirmed case. They will be actively followed up by the designated public health services
- if they develop new symptoms, or their existing symptoms worsen within the 14-day observation period, they should call the designated public health services for reassessment
- if they are unwell at any time within their 14-day observation period and they test positive for COVID-19 they will become a confirmed case and will be treated for the infection. If testing is not available, but the symptoms are consistent with COVID-19, they may nonetheless be considered as a confirmed case.
- Staff who have not had close contact with the original confirmed case do not need to take any precautions other than monitoring their health for symptoms and can continue to attend work.

A confirmed case of COVID-19 in the workplace will cause anxiety among co-workers and some may become stressed. Clear communication is important, directing workers to reliable sources of information about COVID-19. Managers should be supportive and understanding and as far as possible flexible on work arrangements.

Cleaning offices and public spaces where there are suspected or confirmed cases of COVID-19

Coronavirus symptoms are similar to a flu-like illness and include dry cough, sore throat, fever, tiredness or shortness of breath. Once symptomatic, all surfaces that the person has come into contact with must be cleaned including:

- all surfaces and objects which are visibly contaminated with body fluids
- all potentially contaminated high-contact areas such as toilets, door handles, telephones

Public areas where a symptomatic individual has passed through and spent minimal time in (such as corridors) but which are not visibly contaminated with body fluids do not need to be specially cleaned and disinfected.

If a person becomes ill in a shared space, these should be cleaned using disposable cloths and the usual detergents, according to current recommended workplace legislation and practice. Precautionary measures should be taken to protect cleaners.

All waste that has been in contact with the individual, including used tissues, and masks if used, should be put in a plastic rubbish bag and tied when full. The plastic bag should then be placed in a second bin bag and tied. It should be put in a safe place and marked for storage until the result is available. If the individual tests negative, this can be put in the normal waste. Should the individual test positive, you will be instructed what to do with the waste by public health authorities.

Advice on travel and meetings

Returning from travel to affected areas

People who have returned from areas where COVID-19 countermeasures are in effect in the last 14 days should avoid attending work. They should call the designated public health service for advice and self-isolate.

Advice from your national public health authority is in place for what to do if you have returned in the last 14 days from specified countries or areas, which is updated on an ongoing basis.

All other staff should continue to attend work, unless otherwise advised by the national authorities or their employer.

Advice for staff returning from travel anywhere else within the last 14 days

These staff can continue to attend work unless they have been informed that they have had contact with a confirmed case of COVID-19. If individuals are aware that they have had close contact with a confirmed case of COVID-19 they should contact their employer and the designated public health services for further advice.

The latest country information is available from the national authorities or from the ECDC website (<https://www.ecdc.europa.eu/en/cases-2019-ncov-eueea>).

Organising meetings or events

Organisers of meetings and events need to think about the potential risk from COVID-19 because:

- There is a risk that people attending your meeting or event might be unwittingly bringing the COVID-19 virus to the meeting.
- Others might be unknowingly exposed to COVID-19.

BEFORE the meeting or event

1. Consider whether the meeting or event is necessary or whether it could be postponed or replaced with a tele or video conference. Can it be scaled down so that fewer people attend?
2. Check and follow the advice from the authorities in the community where you plan to hold the meeting or event.
3. Develop and agree a preparedness plan to prevent infection at your meeting or event

- Ensure and verify information and communication channels in advance with key partners such as public health and health care authorities
- Pre-order sufficient supplies and materials, including tissues and hand sanitizer for all participants.
- Actively monitor where COVID-19 is circulating. Advise participants in advance that if they have any symptoms or feel unwell, they should not attend.
- Make sure all organisers, participants, caterers and visitors at the event provide contact details: mobile telephone number, email and address where they are staying. State clearly that their details will be shared with local public health authorities if any participant becomes ill with a suspected infectious disease.

4. Develop and agree a response plan in case someone at the meeting becomes ill with symptoms of COVID-19 (see #What to do if an employee or a member of the public becomes unwell and believe they have been exposed to COVID-19)

DURING the meeting or event

1. Provide information or a briefing, preferably both orally and in writing, on COVID-19 and the measures that organisers are taking to make this event safe for participants.

- Build trust. For example, as an icebreaker, practice ways to say hello without touching.
- Encourage regular hand-washing or use of an alcohol rub by all participants at the meeting or event
- Encourage participants to cover their face with the crook of their elbow or a tissue if they cough or sneeze. Supply tissues and closed bins to dispose of them in.
- Provide contact details or a health hotline number that participants can call for advice or to give information.

2. Provide dispensers of alcohol-based hand rub prominently around the venue.

3. If there is space, arrange seats so that participants are at least two metres apart.

4. Open windows and doors whenever possible to make sure the venue is well ventilated.

5. If anyone starts to feel unwell, follow your preparedness plan (see #What to do if an employee or a member of the public becomes unwell and believe they have been exposed to COVID-19).

AFTER the meeting

1. Retain the names and contact details of all participants for at least one month. This will help public health authorities trace people who may have been exposed to COVID-19 if one or more participants become ill shortly after the event.
2. If someone at the meeting or event was isolated as a suspected COVID-19 case, the organiser should let all participants know this. They should be advised to monitor themselves for symptoms for 14 days. If they start to feel unwell they should stay at home and contact the relevant public health authority.

Further information and resources

Certifying absence from work

In relation to COVID-19, the employer should:

- Use discretion on the need for medical evidence for a period of absence where a worker is advised to self-isolate due to suspected COVID-19 and follow advice provided by the national authorities.
- Ensure that sick leave policies are flexible and consistent with public health guidance and that workers are aware of these policies.

- Talk with companies that provide subcontracted or temporary workers about the importance of sick workers staying home and encourage them to develop non-punitive leave policies.
- Not require a healthcare provider's note for workers who are sick with flu-like symptoms to validate their illness or to return to work, as healthcare provider offices and medical facilities may be extremely busy and not able to provide such documentation in a timely way.
- Employers should maintain flexible policies that permit workers to stay at home to care for a sick or dependent family member, as more workers might need to do this than is usual.

Handling post, packages or food from affected areas

Workers should continue to follow existing risk assessments and safe systems of work. There is no perceived increase in risk for handling post or freight from specified areas.

Resources

- OSH wiki article: Epidemics and the workplace

EU-OSHA's sister agency, the **European Centre for Disease Prevention and Control (ECDC)**, is closely monitoring the spread of the coronavirus and is regularly posting updates and resources on its website.

- National information resources for the public on COVID-19 – ECDC (<https://www.ecdc.europa.eu/en/novel-coronavirus-china/sources-updated>)
- How can you protect yourself and others from infection – ECDC guidance (<https://www.ecdc.europa.eu/sites/default/files/documents/covid19-leaflet-public-travellers-EC-en.pdf>)
- Questions and answers on Coronavirus - WHO (<https://www.who.int/news-room/q-a-detail/q-a-coronaviruses>)

The **World Health Organization (WHO)** and the **International Labour Organization (ILO)**, as well as the **Canadian Centre for Occupational Health and Safety (CCOSH)** have also published practical information for workplaces.

- Download the WHO's guide Getting your workplace ready for COVID-19 (<https://www.who.int/docs/default-source/coronaviruse/getting-workplace-ready-for-covid-19.pdf>)

Check out CCOHS' coronavirus factsheet (<https://www.ccohs.ca/oshanswers/diseases/coronavirus.html>)

Additional EC, WHO and ILO and other resources include:

- European Commission dedicated webpage on Covid-19 (https://ec.europa.eu/info/live-work-travel-eu/health/coronavirus-response_en)
- HSA, https://www.hsa.ie/eng/news_events_media/news/news_and_articles/dept-of-health_covid-19-poster_for-public-offices_5_.pdf
- Australian government, <https://www.health.gov.au/resources/publications/coronavirus-covid-19-information-on-the-use-of-surgical-masks>

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