

## Coronavirus | Key questions for employers to consider

With the threat of coronavirus (COVID-19) intensifying, now is the time for employers to carefully review the strategies, policies, and procedures they have in place to protect their employees, customers, and operations. Here are some key questions that you should ask of your organisation as you prepare for and respond to the spread of the virus.

### 1. How can we best protect our employees from exposure in the workplace?

The coronavirus disease is believed to spread largely through respiratory droplets from coughing and sneezing, and it seems to spread easily. It may also be possible to become infected by touching a contaminated surface or object and then touching one's nose or mouth. It is recommended that employees should:

- Stay home if they have respiratory symptoms (coughing, sneezing, shortness of breath) and/or a temperature above 100.4 F.
- Leave work if they develop these symptoms while at the workplace.
- Shield coughs and sneezes with a tissue, elbow, or shoulder (not bare hands).
- Wash hands often with soap and water for at least 20 seconds or use an alcohol-based hand sanitiser.

### 2. What provisions should I make available to my employees to reduce the risk of infection?

As hand washing is one of the most effective defences, employers need to make sure that employees have ready access to washing facilities and that those are kept well stocked with soap and (ideally) paper towels. There is some evidence that paper towel drying is less likely to spread viruses than jet dryers. Alcohol-based hand sanitisers and sanitising wipes should be distributed throughout the workplace, and all frequently touched surfaces such as workstations, countertops and doorknobs should be routinely cleaned. Increased cleaning of common areas using standard cleaning agents can also reduce risk of spread of respiratory disease.

### 3. What are my duties under health and safety law for coronavirus?

Under the Health and Safety at Work Act 1974, employers have a duty to do everything that is “reasonably practicable” to safeguard their employees and those affected by their operations. A failure to do so may result in criminal liability. Furthermore, the Management of Health and Safety at Work Regulations 1999 require you to compile a suitable and sufficient risk assessment covering risks to employees who are at work, as well as risks to non-employees arising from your operations, and to make and give effect to appropriate arrangements for planning, organisation, control, monitoring and review. These arrangements need to be recorded in writing for employers with five or more staff. Coronavirus is a risk that employees may be exposed to during their work activities, hence it is something that has to be assessed and reasonably practicable measures introduced. The starting point is to conduct a risk assessment (refer to our template risk assessment, which you can adapt).

### 4. When should we exclude workers or visitors from the workspace?

Employees should stay home, or go home, if they have symptoms of coronavirus infection or are at high risk of contracting coronavirus. It is recommended that organisations bar employees or visitors from coming to the workplace for a period 14 days after a “medium” or “high-risk” exposure to the virus — generally meaning having been in close contact with someone who is known to be infected or having travelled from a high-risk region.

### 5. Should I be using hand-held thermal scanners to test employees?

Organisations can check temperatures using hand-held thermal scanners and consider excluding staff or visitors with

temperatures over 100.4 F. However, temperature is not an exceptionally accurate way to assess risk as it is possible that some will be contagious but have no fever. Others will have higher temperatures not related to this virus. Thus, an elevated temperature in combination with respiratory symptoms is the best indicator of possible infection.

#### **6. Should we revise our policy on benefits and sickness absence?**

The likelihood that increasing numbers of employees will be unable to work either because they are sick or must care for others means that you should review your pay and sick leave policies now. For further information and some FAQs on the implications of employment, please visit our Coronavirus Advice Hub.

#### **7. Have we maximised employees' ability to work remotely?**

While many jobs require people to be physically present, work (including meetings) that can be done remotely should be encouraged if coming to work or traveling risks exposure to the virus. Videoconferencing, for instance, is a good alternative to risky face-to-face meetings. To maximise this opportunity, you should be reviewing your IT infrastructure and ability for employees to work effectively and be productive from home.

#### **8. Do we have a robust process in place to communicate with employees?**

It is imperative for organisations to be able to reach all workers, including those not at the worksite, with regular, internally coordinated, factual updates about infection control and symptoms, as well as company policy regarding remote working and circumstances in which employees might be excluded from or allowed to return to the workplace. These communications should be carefully coordinated to avoid inconsistent policies being communicated by different managers or functions. Clearly this requires organisations to maintain current phone/text and email contact information for all employees and test organisation-wide communication periodically.

#### **9. Should we revise our policies around international and domestic business travel?**

It is prudent to limit employee business travel from areas where coronavirus is most prevalent — both to prevent illness and to prevent loss of productivity due to quarantine or employee exclusion from the workplace after travel. For up-to-date information on travel advice, visit <https://www.gov.uk/foreign-travel-advice>. Employees should be especially careful not to travel if they feel unwell, as they might face quarantine on return if they have a fever even without significant risk of coronavirus infection.

#### **10. Are our employees adequately trained?**

All employees should have ready access to appropriate information (such as on infection control and company policies) and should know who to contact within the organisation to report exposures. Managers have a key role to play in implementing and maintaining your arrangements.