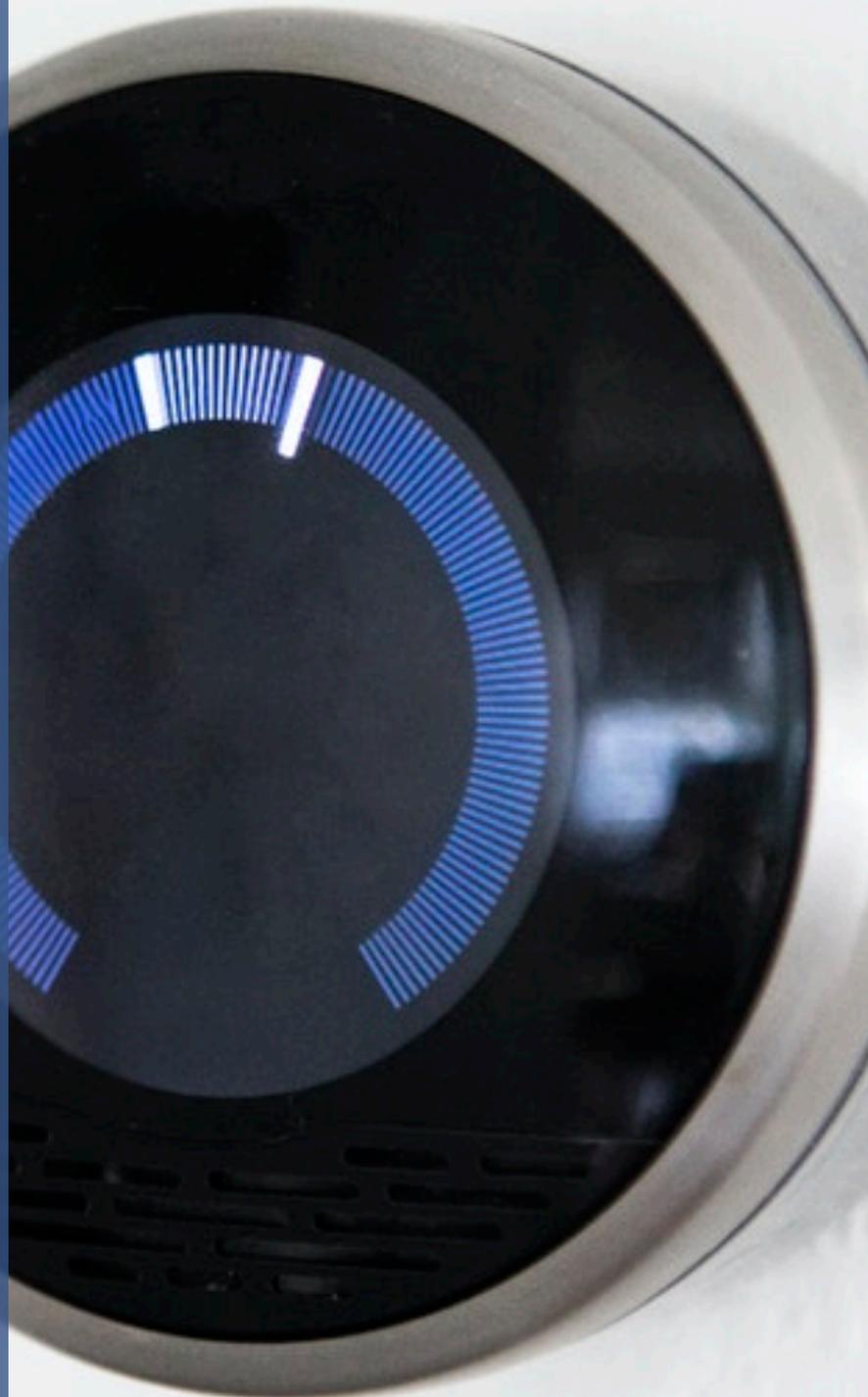


Heating Your Workplace Guide

Can we turn our heating on during the coronavirus pandemic?



Introduction

COVID-19 is a new disease and research is still ongoing to identify how and under what circumstances the virus that causes it can travel, including through heating, ventilation and air conditioning (HVAC) systems. Although the risk of such systems propagating the virus is considered low at the present time providing there is an adequate supply of fresh air, proper consideration and management is necessary to ensure this is achieved in practice.

The answer at the time of writing (6 April 2021) is yes, it is safe to turn the heating on in most working environments. However, there are a number of elements we need to consider.

Duties under law

Employers have several duties that may potentially conflict with each other when dealing with the risks of COVID-19. These include:

- A requirement for effective and suitable provision of fresh or purified air.
- During work hours, the temperature inside all workplace buildings must be “reasonable”. This is (where possible) at least 16°C, or at least 13°C where rigorous physical work is being carried out².
- Government guidance on COVID-19 mitigation in the workplace recommends that “ventilation into the building should be optimised to ensure the maximum fresh air supply is provided to all areas of the facility wherever possible”.
- Adequate provision of fire safety measures. This may come into conflict with COVID-19 advice to keep doors open when those doors are also fire doors designed to stop the spread of fire and smoke.
- It is important that you consult with your workers on any proposed changes to ventilation and air conditioning. This should be done through your normal consultation channels.

General ventilation

In general, the supply of fresh air can be increased in most buildings by opening doors and windows where safe to do so. However, consideration should be given to the potential for people to climb through open windows, and opening restrictors should be fitted and maintained where needed.

Fire doors should not be kept open unless by suitable hold-open devices that release in the event of a fire alarm. Where such devices are fitted, they should be maintained and checked regularly to ensure they function as intended, for example as part of a weekly fire alarm check. If you are unsure if a particular door is a fire door, you should consult with the building’s fire risk assessor or a fire engineer. If in any doubt, the door should be kept closed except when in use.

During periods of cold weather, the degree to which doors and windows are kept open should be balanced against the requirements to maintain a reasonable temperature in the workplace. Having thermometers available in the workplace is a legal requirement and will help to determine if the balance between these factors is being achieved. However, it is important that where no other form of fresh air supply is available, at least some windows and/or doors are kept partially open to increase air circulation.

Providing that a good supply of fresh air is maintained, the risk of spreading the virus by using ceiling and desk fans is considered to be extremely low and as such their use should be encouraged to help prevent pockets of stagnant air developing.

HVAC / air conditioning

In general, HVAC systems should be operated for extended hours to help maintain adequate fresh air. For example, consider starting the system two hours before normal work time and turning it off two hours after close of business, or setting it so as to maintain normal speed even when the building is operating with reduced personnel present.

It is recommended that HVAC systems that remove and re-circulate air between different rooms have the re-circulation feature turned off and turned over to a fresh air only supply. You do not need to adjust air conditioning systems that mix some of the extracted air with fresh air and return it to the room as this increases the fresh air ventilation rate. Also, you do not need to adjust systems in individual rooms or portable units as these operate on 100% recirculation. However, you should still ensure a good supply of fresh air in the room.

Action to be taken

We recommend the following process when assessing the risks of heating and ventilation in regard to COVID-19 risk:

1. Regularly check [government guidance](#) and the [HSE website](#) for any updates on the subject.
2. If you are unsure how your heating, HVAC or air conditioning system works or how to adjust the fresh air supply from it, contact the system installer or other competent HVAC engineer for further advice.
3. Ensure that heating systems that blow hot air have a fresh, well-ventilated air supply and are not recirculating air.
4. Check that all work rooms have fresh air supply but are also warm enough to work comfortably in.

The Chartered Institute of Building Service Engineers has a guide on improving ventilation in buildings during the COVID-19 outbreak which gives more in-depth advice on this topic.

References and further information

1. [Regulation 6 Workplace \(Health, Safety and Welfare\) Regulations 1992 \(as amended\)](#)
2. [Workplace \(Health, Safety and Welfare\) Regulations 1992 Approved Code of Practice](#)
3. [Working safely during COVID-19 in offices and contact centres](#)
4. [CIBSE COVID-19 Ventilation Guidance](#)
5. [HSE advice on air conditioning and ventilation during the coronavirus pandemic](#)