Australian Government
Department of Health

Information for employers

This information sheet should be read in conjunction with other 'What you need to know', 'Social distancing' content on health.gov.au and the 'Information about routine environmental cleaning and disinfection in the community' information sheet found at www.health.gov.au/covid19-resources.

Planning considerations

Employers should review or develop their COVID-19 business continuity plan. Planning can help reduce the impact of COVID-19 on your business.

Planning should consider essential functions and, where possible, ensure these are protected so the business can continue to operate if key staff members are absent. Planning can help reduce the strain on your business in the event staff have to take leave unexpectedly.

You may need to reconsider reliance on others (e.g. suppliers) and be prepared to change your business practices where necessary to perform critical operations. For example, you may need to consider alternative suppliers or temporarily suspend some of your operations. You should also consider customer reliance on your products or services and prioritise according to customer needs.

For more information and resources on business continuity planning, go to: https://www.business.gov.au/New-to-business-essentials/When-things-dont-go-to-plan

What should employers do to reduce risk of COVID-19?

You should identify reliable sources of information such as health.gov.au and stay up to date with the most recent advice on COVID-19.

You should provide information to all employees and contract staff on relevant official advice and procedures to prevent the spread of COVID-19. This includes domestic and cleaning staff, where applicable.

If your work is continuing you should take steps to minimise the spread of COVID-19 in the workplace and protect staff.

You should undertake a formal risk assessment process and apply a hierarchy of appropriate controls. These will be specific to your work, your workplace and your workers. Possible controls include, but are not limited to:

- Employers should have policies, procedures and technology to support employees to work from home, if possible.

- Employees are supported to work from home, if possible

- Social distancing is supported (i.e. by changing staff numbers, staggering working hours, or having staff work from home)

- Try to ensure 4 square metres per person and 1.5 metres between people, wherever possible, including in recreational areas such as tea rooms.

- Discouraging car-pooling between employees to and from work

- Promoting good hand hygiene by providing hand washing facilities and/or alcohol-based hand sanitiser and appropriate waste receptacles

- Undertaking frequent cleaning and disinfection of work spaces, particularly objects and surfaces that are frequently touched

- Holding only essential meetings, and doing so via video conferencing, phone, or outside in the open air if possible

- Modify your roster or staffing to reduce staff interactions (i.e. smaller groups, staggered rosters)

- Avoiding non-essential travel

- Train staff on hand and respiratory hygiene and social distancing

- Educate your staff about the early signs and symptoms of COVID-19 and the need to stay home if unwell

- Develop a policy that requires staff to stay home if unwell

- Supporting employees to adhere to official advice about how to help reduce the spread of COVID-19

Ensure you stay up to date with the latest advice and review your risk assessment regularly.

Vulnerable employees

If you have employees who may be at increased risk of a serious infection, they should be supported to work from home where possible. If working from home is not feasible, a risk assessment should be undertaken for the vulnerable employee/s. Risks need to be assessed and addressed, depending on the worker, the workplace and the work. This may include re-assigning vulnerable employees to roles where they don't need to have contact with others, such as non-customer-based roles. If the risk cannot be appropriately addressed, employers and employees should consider alternative arrangements such as leave.

People who are likely to be at higher risk of serious illness if they are infected with the virus include:

- Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people 50 years and older with one or more chronic medical conditions[1]
- People 65 years and older with one or more chronic medical conditions[1]
- People 70 years and older
- People with compromised immune systems[2]

There is limited evidence available to assess the risk in pregnant women.

What precautions should cleaning staff take?

For information on cleaning and disinfection, see the information sheet on 'Information about routine environmental cleaning and disinfection in the community' at https://health.govcms.gov.au/resources/publications/coronavirus-covid-19-information-about-routine-environmental-cleaning-and-disinfection-in-the-community

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[1] The most current list of chronic medical conditions that increase risk of serious illness from COVID-19 can be accessed on the Department of Health website

[2] For more information, see the Department of Health website

Can food and water spread coronavirus?

Food-borne spread of COVID-19 is unlikely when food is properly prepared and cooked. Employers in the food industry should adhere to strict hygiene and food preparation policies to minimise the risk of transmission of COVID-19. Do not share crockery or utensils.

It is currently unknown if the virus is able to survive in sewerage. Those who work closely with sewage should take the same precautions as those outlined above for cleaners.

How can we help prevent the spread of coronavirus?

Practising good hand and sneeze/cough hygiene is the best defence against most viruses. You should:

- Wash your hands frequently with soap and water for 20 seconds, or use alcohol based hand rub including before and after eating, and after going to the toilet
- Cover your cough and sneeze, dispose of tissues and wash your hands afterwards
- Avoid close contact with others
- Stay more than 1.5 metres from people wherever possible

Can staff go to work?

Staff who are unwell should not go to work. If staff develop symptoms at work such as fever, cough, sore throat or shortness of breath they should seek medical advice. For more information on identifying the symptoms of COVID-19, go to
https://www.health.gov.au/resources/publications/coronavirus-covid-19-identifying-the-symptoms

If a worker is found to have COVID-19 you need to follow the health advice provided by the local public health authority. More information for employers on what to do if a worker has COVID-19, is at:
https://www.safeworkaustralia.gov.au/covid-19-information-workplaces/industry-information/general-industry-information/covid-19-your?tab=tab-toc-employer
Isolation is when a person is found to have the condition and needs to stay away from others to protect the community from illness.

If you have an employee who has been confirmed to have COVID-19, public health authorities may contact the workplace. People confirmed to have COVID-19 require a formal period of isolation and cannot go to work until they are formally released by the local public health unit or their treating clinician.

Quarantine is where a well person who may be at risk of developing COVID-19 stays away from others to protect the community from illness in case they become sick with the disease.

Staff who have returned to Australia from overseas (or in some cases from interstate) must now quarantine at home or in a hotel for 14 days. People who have been in close contact with someone with COVID-19 must also quarantine at home or in a hotel for 14 days.

People who require a period of quarantine cannot go to work until their period of quarantine is over.

For more information, see:
https://www.health.gov.au/news/health-alerts/novel-coronavirus-2019-ncov-health-alert/how-to-protect-yourself-and-others-from-coronavirus-covid-19/self-isolation-self-quarantine-for-coronavirus-covid-19

Employees who are required to quarantine or isolate themselves are advised to alert their employer. If employees are well, they may wish to discuss arrangements for working from home during their period of quarantine or isolation.

Return to work following quarantine

Employees who have completed a 14-day quarantine period (either after returning from travel or because of close contact with a confirmed case), and who did not develop symptoms during quarantine, do not need a medical clearance to return to work. **Employers should not ask these employees to be tested for COVID-19 in order to return to work.**

Return to work following recovery from COVID-19

Employees who have been isolated after having tested positive for COVID-19 can return to work when they have fully recovered and have met the criteria for clearance from isolation. The criteria may vary depending on circumstances of the workplace and states and territories may manage clearance from isolation differently. Clearance may be by the public health authority or the persons treating clinician.

There are specific criteria which apply to health care workers and aged care workers. As these may change, these workers should check with a medical practitioner or the public health authority as to whether the criteria for clearance from isolation have been met before they return to work.

Even after recovering from COVID-19, people should continue to be diligent regarding hand hygiene and cough etiquette and practise social distancing.

Reducing stigma in the workplace

It is important employers support staff returning to work and workplace discrimination does not occur. Employers can take steps to reduce stigma around COVID-19 for those returning to work after a period of precautionary self-quarantine or illness. These include:

- Encouraging staff not to make determinations of risk based on race or country of origin

- Maintaining confidentiality regarding staff members confirmed to have COVID-19

- Inviting staff to discuss, in private, any concerns about COVID-19 in the workplace

- Advising staff that it is safe for their colleagues who have completed -quarantine to return to work once the period has been completed, as long as they don't have symptoms

Support for small businesses

The Australian Government is taking action to support businesses during the COVID-19 health crisis. For more information on assistance for businesses, go to https://treasury.gov.au/coronavirus/businesses

More information

For the latest advice, information and resources, go to www.health.gov.au

For more information on responding to COVID-19 in the workplace, go to https://www.safeworkaustralia.gov.au/covid-19-information-workplaces

Call the National Coronavirus Helpline on 1800 020 080. It operates 24 hours a day, seven days a week. If you require translating or interpreting services, call 131 450.

The phone number of your state or territory public health agency is available at www.health.gov.au/state-territory-contacts

If you have concerns about your health, speak to your doctor.