

Exposure to coronavirus in workplaces

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An alert about the risks associated with potential exposure to novel (new) coronavirus (COVID-19) in workplaces.

Background

(Updated 19 March 2020)

An outbreak of respiratory illness has been caused by a new coronavirus first identified in Wuhan, Hubei Province, China.

The outbreak of COVID-19 was declared a pandemic on 11 March 2020 by the World Health Organization (WHO). A pandemic is the worldwide spread of disease.

The number of confirmed cases of COVID-19 in Australia is growing. The situation is changing rapidly.

On 16 March 2020 the Victorian government declared a State of Emergency in Victoria, to help minimise the spread of COVID-19.

What is coronavirus?

Coronaviruses are a large family of viruses which may cause illness in animals or humans. COVID-19 is the most recently discovered coronavirus.

A coronavirus infection can cause mild to severe respiratory illness.

Symptoms can range from mild illness to pneumonia. Affected people may experience:

- Fever
- Acute respiratory infection (shortness of breath or cough)

The World Health Organization has confirmed that the main driver of transmission is from symptomatic patients, through coughing or sneezing. Transmission by people without symptoms is possible, but rare.

Employers have a duty to provide and maintain, so far as is reasonably practicable, a working environment that is safe and without risks to the health of employees. This includes identifying risks to health or safety associated with potential exposure to the coronavirus.

Identifying risks to health

Employers must identify whether there is a risk to health of employees from exposure to coronavirus at their workplace.

Identifying the level of risk can include:

- monitoring expert advice as the coronavirus situation develops (for example, from the Department of Health and Human Services (DHHS))
- reviewing infection control policies, procedures and practices, to ensure they are effective and are being followed
- educating and keeping employees up to date on new information
- monitoring the latest travel advice on the Smartraveller website for anyone planning to travel overseas for work
- considering whether undertaking work activities puts other people (such as clients or members of the public) at risk of exposure to coronavirus
- talking to employees who have:
 - travelled or are planning to travel overseas
 - been in contact with confirmed cases of coronavirus

Controlling risks to health

Where a risk to health is identified at a workplace, employers must, so far as is reasonably practicable, eliminate or reduce the risk.

Employers also have a duty to consult with employees and health and safety representatives (HSRs), so far as is reasonably practicable, on matters related to health or safety that directly affect, or are likely to directly affect them. This includes consulting on decisions about how to control risks associated with COVID-19 in the workplace.

The type of control measures required depends on the level of risk as well as the availability and suitability of controls for each workplace. Control measures may include:

- implementing social distancing initiatives in accordance with recommendations made by the Victorian Chief Health Officer
- providing adequate facilities or products (such as hand sanitiser, where available) to allow employees to maintain good hygiene practices
- providing appropriate personal protective equipment, including information or training on why the equipment is required and how to safely use it
- where possible, avoiding shared use of phones, desks, offices, or other work tools and equipment
- developing an infection control policy

- reconsidering any work-related travel plans or events (such as workshops or meetings) that involve large groups of people
- where possible avoiding face to face meetings by using other methods of communication, such as phone or videoconferences
- ensuring employees understand when to stay away from the workplace and advising them of the requirement to self-isolate at home for 14 days if:
 - returning from overseas travel
 - they have been in contact with confirmed cases of coronavirus

Employees should advise their employer if they develop symptoms during the isolation period, particularly if they have been in the workplace.

If an employee thinks they may have been in close contact with a confirmed case of coronavirus they should:

- monitor their health and immediately raise this with their employer
- call the coronavirus information line on 1800 675 398 for advice, if needed

To find out what close contact means, see the coronavirus information on the DHHS website.

The employer may ask the employee to seek medical clearance, or work from home during the risk period.

If an employee develops symptoms they should isolate themselves immediately, call the coronavirus information line on 1800 675 398 and follow the self-isolation guidance available on the DHHS website.

Employers should immediately seek advice from the DHHS if there has been a confirmed case of COVID-19 in their workplace.

Everyone in the workplace should practice good hygiene by:

- regularly cleaning their hands with soap and water (minimum 20 seconds) or an alcohol-based hand rub
- if hands are visibly dirty wash them with soap and water
- always washing hands with soap and water before eating and after visiting the toilet
- covering their nose and mouth when coughing and sneezing, and disposing of used tissues immediately
- if a tissue is not to hand, cough or sneeze into their upper sleeve or elbow
- avoiding close contact with anyone with cold or flu-like symptoms
- seeking advice from a health care professional if they are unwell, and staying away from the workplace and other public places



Working from locations other than the usual place of work

In some circumstances, employers may consider recommending to employees that they work from a location other than their usual place of work. For example, some office-based employees may be able to do their work from home.

Whether this is a reasonably practicable measure depends on the specifics of the workplace, the facilities available for employees to work remotely and the ability for employees to do their work safely from home.

When making decisions about whether employees should work from home, employers should:

- consult with employees and HSRs
- consider whether working from a different location will introduce additional risks, such as risks associated with hazardous manual handling
- keep up-to-date with information about COVID-19 risks and appropriate control measures
- seek advice specific to their circumstances, including from employee and employer organisations, legal providers and official advice issued by the Department of Health and Human Services (DHHS).

For some workplaces working remotely will not be reasonably practicable (such as those involving customer facing roles or work that relies on specialised plant or equipment). Other controls, such as implementing other forms of social distancing or delaying non-essential tasks may minimise the risk of infection.

Legal duties

Employers have duties under the Occupational Health and Safety Act 2004 (OHS Act), which include that they must, so far as is reasonably practicable:

- provide and maintain a working environment that is safe and without risks to the health of employees and independent contractors
- provide such information, instruction, training or supervision to employees and independent contractors as is necessary to enable those persons to perform their work in a way that is safe and without risks to health
- monitor the health of employees of the employer
- monitor conditions at any workplace under the employer's management and control
- provide information concerning health and safety to employees, including (where appropriate) in languages other than English
- ensure that persons other than employees of the employer are not exposed to risks to their health or safety arising from the conduct of the undertaking of the employer
- consult with employees and HSRs, if any, on matters related to health or safety that directly affect, or are likely to directly affect them

Employees also have duties under the OHS Act, which includes that they must:

- take reasonable care for their own health and safety
- take reasonable care for the health and safety of persons who may be affected by the employee's acts or omissions at a workplace
- co-operate with their employer with respect to any action taken by the employer to comply with a requirement imposed by or under the OHS Act

Further information

- **Novel coronavirus - Department of Health and Human Services**

<https://www.worksafe.vic.gov.au/resources/novel-coronavirus-department-health-and-human-services>

- **Coronavirus (COVID-19) health alert - Australian Government**

<https://www.worksafe.vic.gov.au/resources/coronavirus-covid-19-health-alert-australian-government>

- **Smartraveller - Australian Government**

<https://www.worksafe.vic.gov.au/resources/smartraveller-australian-government>

- **Coronavirus (COVID-19) information for hotels and hotel staff**

<https://www.worksafe.vic.gov.au/resources/coronavirus-covid-19-information-hotels-and-hotel-staff>