

Exposure to coronavirus in workplaces

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

Background

An outbreak of respiratory illness has been caused by a new coronavirus first identified in Wuhan, Hubei Province, China. To date, most people infected are residents of China or people who have recently travelled to China. However new cases, including deaths, are increasingly being reported outside of mainland China.

There have been a limited number of confirmed cases of this strain of coronavirus in Australia to date, including in Victoria.

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 – [link below](#))
- 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 ([link below](#)) for anyone planning to travel overseas for work
- considering whether work activities put other people at risk
- talking to employees who have:
 - travelled or are planning to travel overseas for work
 - been in contact with confirmed cases of novel coronavirus

Controlling risks to health

Where a risk to health is identified at a workplace, employers must, so far as is reasonably practicable, eliminate the risks, or minimise the risks. The type of control measure required depends on the level of risk as well as the availability and suitability of controls for each workplace, and may include:

- providing adequate facilities or products (such as hand sanitiser) to allow employees to maintain good hygiene practices
- developing an infection control policy
- advising any employees to self-isolate at home for 14 days if:
 - in the last 14 days they have been in any of the countries listed by the Department of Health and Human Services (link below) as requiring self-quarantine
 - they have been in contact with confirmed cases of novel coronavirus

If an employee thinks they may be at risk of infection of coronavirus:

- The employee should raise this with their manager immediately.
- The employer may ask the employee to seek medical clearance, or work from home during the risk period.
- If employees are not fit for work due to contracting coronavirus, they should follow the medical advice to remain isolated for 14 days.

Employers should advise any employees who think that they might have novel coronavirus infection and have been overseas in the past 14 days, prior to the onset of their symptoms, to call ahead to their general practitioner before attending and inform them of their symptoms, travel history and concerns.

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
- avoiding close contact with anyone with cold or flu-like symptoms
- seeing a health care professional if they are unwell, and staying away from the workplace and other public places

Legal duties

Under the Occupational Health and Safety Act 2004 (OHS Act), employers 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

Employees 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

Eligible workers would be entitled to personal leave if they are not fit for work due to contracting coronavirus.