

A guide to managing coronavirus at work

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Contents

- 3 Employers' duty of care**
- 3 Hygiene measures**
- 4 Dealing with different employee scenarios**
 - Employees who self quarantine
 - Suspending employees who may have been exposed
 - Employees who refuse to come into work due to concerns
- 5 Closure of business**
- 5 Next steps**
- 6 Overview of coronavirus**
 - What is the coronavirus
 - The symptoms
 - How it is spread

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This document has been produced for general information for employers only. The information is correct at the time of publication but may be subject to change. Please note: we have removed the travel information section which was included in version 1.0 of this document. For the latest official travel advice from the government please [click here](#).

For live updates on the coronavirus situation from the government [click here](#).

Employers' duty of care

Employers have a duty of care towards their employees which includes not exposing them to unnecessary risk. In this case, that may include not putting them in a position in which they could become infected by the virus without taking all reasonable precautions.

This duty of care, where Coronavirus is concerned, may differ depending on an employee's specific circumstances, for example, if they are older or they have underlying health conditions. It's important to remember that employees will be worried about the virus. In addition to having a duty of care to protect health and safety, employers also need to consider the wellbeing of their staff.

Consider any wellbeing initiatives the company offers and remind employees of them, for example, an Employee Assistance Programme.

Hygiene measures

The World Health Organisation's standard infection control measures are:

- Frequently cleaning hands by using alcohol-based hand rub or soap and water
- When coughing and sneezing cover mouth and nose with flexed elbow or tissue – throw tissue away immediately and wash your hands.
- Avoid close contact with anyone who has a fever or cough.
- If you have a fever, cough and difficulty breathing seek medical care early and share previous travel history with your healthcare provider.

Dealing with different employee scenarios

Employees who self quarantine

There is no obligation to pay an employee who is not sick but cannot come to work because they have been told by a medical expert to self-isolate, or have had to go into quarantine.

However, Acas suggests that it is best practice to treat this period as sick leave and follow their usual sick pay policy, or offer the employee the option of taking paid annual leave. This helps to reduce the risk that the employee feels compelled to attend work and, by doing so, puts other employees at risk of catching the virus.

Some employers may nevertheless choose not to pay employees in this situation. Whilst this is not unlawful, employers should be consistent in their approach if more than one employee is affected, in order to avoid claims of less favourable treatment.

Suspending employees who may have been exposed

Where the employer has concerns about a non-symptomatic employee (particularly if it is known or suspected that the employee has had contact with someone known to have the virus) then the best advice might be to play it safe with a brief period of suspension on precautionary grounds.

Where the employer chooses to suspend returning employees just as a precaution, it will have to be on full pay unless the contract gives them a right to suspend without pay for this reason (which is unlikely). This will not be medical suspension under the statutory scheme, which would attract medical suspension pay, as this has a narrow definition which does not cover this type of situation.

The employer may also wish to explore alternatives, such as permitting the employee to work from home if possible.

Employees who refuse to come into work due to concerns

If an employee is worried about catching the virus and so refuses to attend work, Acas suggests listening to the employee's concerns and offering reassurance. An employer's response to this will depend on the actual risk of catching the virus, will be different for every employer and will depend on specific circumstances including whether anyone in the workforce has already been diagnosed or there is another real risk of exposure.

Employers may decide to offer a period of paid annual leave or unpaid leave, or allow the employee to work from home where this is feasible. Responses should be reasonable to the specific situation.

Discrimination, bullying and harassment

Coronavirus is not a reason to treat employees differently because of their national origin. Placing extra obligations on individuals (more robust hygiene methods, for example) just because they are from China places employers at risk of a claim of race discrimination.

Extra hygiene measures, if implemented, should be required of all employees.

Employers should be alert to 'banter', or more serious instances of harassment, between employees about the virus which relates to someone's nationality or ethnicity and ensure that their zero tolerance stance to harassment is maintained.

Closure of business

Some employers may decide to put in place a plan to cover a situation where their business temporarily closes down due to exposure/potential exposure to the virus.

Employees who are ready and willing to work but are not provided with work (as would be the case with a temporary closure) can be placed on lay off.

Lay off must be with full pay unless there is a provision within the contract for lay off without pay (subject to the payment of statutory guarantee pay for employees with at least one month's service at the time of lay off). If there is no contractual provision, employers can attempt to agree with employees a period of unpaid lay off.

Next steps

We hope the information in this guide will help you to prepare and act with confidence. If you have a specific query relating to managing Coronavirus issues in your workplace, please contact our Lead HR Consultant Diane Johnson on 01772 431233 or by email to djohnson@rfm-more.co.uk

Overview of coronavirus

The coronavirus causes flu-like symptoms and can potentially lead to serious illness and death. It first appeared in December 2019 in Wuhan, which is within the Hubei province of China. Since then, it has spread to countries across the globe, with the majority of infections appearing in individuals who originate from, or who have travelled to, Wuhan.

Although the number of reported cases of coronavirus in the UK remain low, the situation is quickly evolving. There are a number of risks posed by the virus that employers will need to be aware of and it is important to remember that employers have a duty of care towards their employees. To this end, they must take reasonable steps to protect the health and safety of their workforce.

What is the coronavirus

The World Health Organisation explains that coronaviruses (CoV) are a large family of viruses that cause illness ranging from the common cold to more severe diseases such as SARS (Severe Acute Respiratory Syndrome). This particular episode has been named 'COVID-19'.

Cases in several countries have now emerged, with the majority of infections appearing in individuals who originate from, or who have travelled to, Wuhan. However, at least one infected individual had not recently been to China but is married to someone who had. This shows that the virus can be passed from person to person.

The risk of anyone who has not recently been to China picking up the infection is very low, unless someone they are close to has a confirmed case. The risk is even lower where good hygiene procedures are maintained. Obviously, risk of becoming infected will differ depending on personal circumstances but it is important to convey to employees the reality of the situation to keep concern proportionate to the risk.

The Symptoms

Symptoms include fever, cough and shortness of breath. Some people will suffer from mild illness and recover easily whilst in other cases, infection can progress to pneumonia. Reports suggest that the elderly, those with weakened immune systems, diabetes, cancer and chronic lung disease are the most susceptible to serious illness and death.

Symptoms can appear in as few as two days after infection or as long as 14 days. This means that, for individuals travelling back from affected areas, they may not even realise they have the disease until they have been back for two weeks.

How it is spread

The virus is most likely to spread from person to person through:

- Direct contact with a person while they are infectious;
- Contact with droplets when an infected person coughs or sneezes; or
- Touching objects or surfaces (such as mugs or desks) that were contaminated by droplets from secretions coughed or sneezed from an infected person with a confirmed infection, and then touching your mouth or face.