HOWSAFE
WORK HEALTH
& SAFETY
21 Waterloo Ave Thornton NSW 2322
Ph (02) 4964 2296
www.howsafe.com.au

COVID-19 – Is it business as usual?

With the coronavirus outbreak being declared a pandemic by the World Health Organisation (WHO), employers must take reasonably practicable steps to ensure the safety of their staff and others at their workplace.

But what does this mean, and what steps should you be taking to minimise the risk of injury from COVID-19?

Step 1 - Keeping informed

With any pandemic, there is always a risk of alarmism. The recent spate of 'panic buying' from supermarkets is an example of the potential hysteria that can develop.

For this reason, it is very important that employers keep themselves informed and up to date on the risks of the COVID-19 virus and obtain information and advice from the experts.

An employer should establish a business continuity team or a designated risk officer or crisis manager who will assume responsibility for sourcing and distributing information.

Ensure that the risk officer receives and communicates to staff regular updates from authorised sources of information including:

- State and Federal Government health authorities;
- Safety regulators in each State and Territory; and
- the WHO.

Step 2 – Assess the risk

Given the potentially widespread health risk to your staff and supply chains, it is important to assess the level of risk that the virus poses to your organisation.

In the case of the COVID-19 virus, there will be both health risks and commercial risks that need to be considered.

In terms of health risks, the factors that will influence the level and gravity of risk your organisation faces will include:

- The industry within which you operate.
- Size, geographic location and demographics of your workforce.
- Nature of the work performed by your employees.

- Frequency of travel and interaction with other organisations.
- Likelihood of exposure of staff to the virus outside of your workplace.
- Culture of reporting safety issues.
- Adequacy of current systems of work to prevent the spread of viruses.

Once you have formed a view as to the level of risk your organisation faces, and where that risk is greatest, you can then develop a plan of action to control those risks.

Step 3 – Developing controls

Providing clear and regular updates to staff is one of the most important controls to put in place.

Staff need to have a clear knowledge of four key matters:

- Medical information regarding isolation/quarantine periods and what steps they should take if they feel unwell, think they may have the virus or have recently returned from an infection zone.
- Reinforcement of hygiene processes in the organisation to reduce the spread of viruses.
- The employer's plan of action if an employee, or someone close to them, is diagnosed with the virus and the impact that this will have on the rest of the staff coming to work. Importantly, whether the office or site will be closed, and for how long.
- Any changes in policies relating to travel, client and staff functions, including the banning of travel to virus-affected areas.

In the case of someone who is suspected or confirmed to have the virus, an employer should encourage or direct the employee to stay at home if they are:

- well enough to receive care at home;
- able to have appropriate caregivers at home;
- able to stay in a separate bedroom;
- able to get access to food and other necessities;
- able to access recommended personal protective equipment, including at a minimum, gloves and mask; and
- not living with others who may be at increased risk of complications from the virus such as the elderly, young or pregnant women, or people who are immunocompromised.

If an employee suspects that they may be infected and are waiting on test results but cannot be isolated at home, they will need to contact a public health unit who will assess and advise on the next steps. As an employer, you will need to ensure that you are kept informed of your employee's progress.

There can also be a significant psychological impact on your staff if they are self-quarantined. This can be the case even if they are able to work from home during the period of isolation. To assist any employee who is in home isolation, encourage them to keep in touch with their colleagues and the workplace via the phone and email or social media.

Step 4 – Briefing your management team

As with any systems of work, it is critical that your managers and supervisors are briefed on the response plan to a potential outbreak of the virus in your business. Managers need to know the steps that are to be taken if, for example, an employee returns from an infection zone or reports

that they, or person to whom they have had close contact, may be suspected of having the virus.

Key Question: Do we have to close our organisation if we suspect that there is a case of COVID-19?

There are generally two scenarios where an organisation will consider closing down their site, being that there is a confirmed case of a staff member diagnosed with COVID-19, or a staff member has been exposed to a person confirmed as having COVID-19.

In either case, employers should seek immediate advice from the Department of Health for their particular situation. However, employers may face general concern from other staff about such an exposure and therefore the issue of a general closure will need to be considered. In the case of organisations such as schools and universities, the consideration will also extend to the safety of the students.

If an employer decides to voluntarily close their office or site, it is important to appreciate that an employer may still have to pay employees. This is because an employer can only stand down an employee without pay under the *Fair Work Act* if the employee cannot usefully be employed because there has been a stoppage at work for which the employer cannot be reasonably held responsible.

Employers can ensure they are providing lawful and reasonable directions by referring to published authorities such as Federal/State Government medical advice, WHO announcements and smart traveller recommendations.

Other options include:

- Directing staff to work from home or other locations.
- Directing employees likely to have been exposed to self-isolate until test results clear them.
- Utilising teleconferences, Skype and cancelling face-to-face meetings or seminars.