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Coronavirus advice for UK employers

Understand how to support your business and workforce through a global health emergency

Introduction

The new coronavirus disease, now officially named Covid-19, was declared a global health emergency by the World Health Organization in January 2020. As the virus continues to spread, it could pose a threat to some organisations.

This factsheet provides an overview of the current coronavirus situation. It explains what the virus is and gives advice on how employers should respond to the threat and support employees.

What is coronavirus?

Coronaviruses (CoV) are a large family of viruses that cause illness ranging from the common cold to more severe diseases such as MERS-CoV and SARS (Cov). The official name for this new disease, not previously seen in humans, is Covid-19. It was first identified in Wuhan City, in Hubei province, China.

Coronaviruses are zoonotic, meaning they are transmitted between animals and people. As this new strain causes a new illness, it's not known exactly how it spreads from person to person, but similar viruses spread by cough droplets.

Common signs of infection include respiratory symptoms, fever, cough, shortness of breath and breathing difficulties. In more severe cases, infection can cause pneumonia, severe acute respiratory syndrome, kidney failure and death. Generally, more severe cases occur in people with weakened immune systems, older people, and those with long-term conditions like diabetes, cancer and chronic lung disease.

On 30 January 2020, the risk to the UK public was raised from low to moderate by the UK

Chief Medical Officers, but the risk to individuals remains low.

The World Health Organization (WHO) has declared the virus a global health emergency. Although it is spreading around the world, and spreading quickly, it is yet to be classed as a 'pandemic'. A pandemic, in WHO terms, is 'the worldwide spread of a disease'. While cases have been confirmed in several countries, it is not spreading within these countries, except in very few cases. It's still unclear how severe the virus is, and how far it will spread.

Currently the main concern for UK employers is dealing with travel to and from China and elsewhere in the region. The Foreign and Commonwealth Office (FCO) has advised against all travel to Hubei province and all but essential travel to the rest of mainland China. The FCO has also advised all UK nationals to leave China where possible. Keep up to date with the latest [advice on travel](#).

How employers should respond to the threat of coronavirus

As the virus continues to spread, it could pose a significant threat to some organisations. We live in a global economy and many employers have operations or supply chains based overseas, including in China. The level of risk a company may face will depend on whether it is directly or indirectly affected in this way. An organisation may also be affected if it employs people who have travelled back, or been in contact with, anyone who has returned from an area affected by the virus.

If the virus becomes a pandemic it could lead to wider disruptions with suppliers and customers and to shortages of fuel and other basic commodities. There may also be disruptions to public transport.

Be prepared

- **Keep up to date with Government and public health advice:** Employers should keep up to date with the situation as it develops and refer employees who are concerned about infection to official and expert medical sources such as [GOV.UK](#) and the [National Health Service](#).
- **Develop a contingency plan:** Every organisation will need to assess its own level of exposure to business disruption caused by the virus. If it has a site, conducts business or has supply chains in China or an affected region, there will be a direct impact to the company's day-to-day operations. The plan will need to take account of current and potential impacts and manage the specific business risks associated with the disruption, including service delivery and workforce issues. Communicate the plan to key teams and individuals across the business.

- **Build a contingency team:** Identify a person, or small group of people, that would take responsibility for operating the contingency plan should a pandemic occur and allocate clear responsibilities for its implementation.
- **If a pandemic does occur:** Those responsible for the contingency plan should meet regularly to review the preparations and ensure they are still fit for purpose. It's important to act early, even if planned contingencies are not then needed.

Look after people's health, well-being and safety

Employees' health, safety and well-being during a global health emergency like the coronavirus outbreak should be paramount. Employers have a statutory duty of care for people's health and safety and to provide a safe place to work, but there's also a strong moral responsibility to ensure that employees feel safe and secure in their employment.

Communicate clearly to employees that they need to take precautions, avoiding travel to affected areas and/or coming into contact with infected or potentially infected people or animals. Advise them on what to do if they think they may have caught the virus.

Immediate advice for employees returning from travel

The [NHS](#) advises:

- Any employee who has returned from Wuhan and Hubei province in the last 14 days should stay indoors, avoid contact with other people and advise the emergency services (via [NHS 111](#)) of their recent travel, even if they do not have symptoms of this virus.
- Any employee who has returned from other areas of China, or Macao, Hong Kong, Thailand, Japan, Republic of Korea, Taiwan, Singapore or Malaysia in the last 14 days and develops a cough, fever or shortness of breath should stay indoors, avoid contact with other people and advise the emergency services (via NHS 111) of their travel.

Wider health and well-being concerns

- Keep up to date and follow official medical advice as it's updated. Keep employees informed, particularly in relation to the specific guidelines for employees who have returned from Wuhan or Hubei province, other parts of China and other affected areas, or have been in contact with an infected person, or with an individual who has returned from affected areas. Actively communicate this advice with your people, customers and suppliers. Actively communicate this advice with your people, customers and suppliers.

- Implement an internal communication strategy so that employees are aware of measures that are being taken to manage the situation in your organisation. Understand that some people may have real concerns about catching the virus, while others may have worries about family or friends stranded in an affected area, or returning from China or another affected area. Try to reassure employees that there is no need to panic and the risk to the UK population remains low. Ensure that line managers are regularly informed about the organisation's contingency plans and how to discuss the situation with any concerned employees, and where to signpost people to for further advice or support.
- Promote the resources you have available to support people's health and well-being generally, including those through an employee assistance programme.
- If the virus spreads and/or becomes a pandemic and the risk of infection is heightened, be prepared to step up the level of support you provide to staff and adjust your resourcing plans accordingly. Keep in mind anyone who may be more vulnerable due to a pre-existing health conditions, age, or pregnancy.
- If employees need to self-quarantine or are sent home as a precaution, this should be done on full pay. Some employment contracts contain a right to suspend employees briefly without pay. However, this right usually only applies in limited circumstances and a suspected illness is unlikely to be covered. Unless there is a clear contractual right to suspend employees without pay or benefits, then employers who insist on this could potentially face claims for breach of contract, unlawful deduction of wages and constructive unfair dismissal.

Develop flexible resourcing plans

- As part of your organisation's contingency plan, explore more flexible resourcing strategies in case your business suffers staffing shortages.
- Develop strategies to maximise the amount of home working to prevent the spread of infection if necessary.
- Investigate ways of harnessing the use of technology to limit the amount of face-to-face contact, for example, video conferencing to facilitate remote meetings. For customer facing organisations, consider introducing or maximising the use of self-service options and online services.
- Increased sickness absence may create a need for other employees, if willing, to work longer hours to keep your business going. If this happens, you will need to comply with the [Working Time Regulations 1998](#) to ensure appropriate length of daytime working hours, night shifts and rest breaks.

- Have in place plans that will enable the organisation to operate on a skeleton staff if necessary. Identify key services and roles that are essential and can't be put on hold, as well as projects or roles that could be temporarily stood down. Identify those individuals and managers who have transferrable skills, who can fulfil more than one function and could be allocated to more essential roles.
- Carry out a resourcing risk assessment of the organisation, identifying essential areas of the business where few employees have the required skills. Training additional employees in these skills should be considered. Ensure that procedures are developed to ensure smooth handovers for employees who are filling in for colleagues in unfamiliar roles. It may be necessary to provide additional training and a risk assessment if individuals are moving to roles where there may be a health and safety risk.
- If your operations are severely affected, consider introducing a voluntary special leave policy on a temporary basis whereby individuals can opt to take paid or unpaid leave. Be mindful that there could be some employees who are willing to take additional time off and welcome a break, but others may struggle financially if they lose pay. Consider offering a shorter working week or other flexible resourcing arrangements and communicate the business reasons to employees.

Useful contacts

[UK Government - Coronavirus: latest information and advice](#)

[UK Government - Foreign travel advice](#)

[National Health Service - Coronavirus \(COVID-19\)](#)

[World Health Organization advice - Novel coronavirus](#)

This factsheet was written by Hazel Ferguson, CIPD Senior Communications Manager, and Rachel Suff.