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Coronavirus (COVID-19) advice for UK employers

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

Introduction

COVID-19 has been declared a pandemic by the World Health Organization. As the virus continues to spread extensively, it's posing a significant challenge to many 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 by being prepared, particularly looking after employees' health and safety and developing flexible resourcing plans.

We're updating this factsheet regularly to ensure it reflects Government advice as this evolves.

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. On 11 March, the World Health Organization (WHO) categorised it as a 'pandemic' which, in WHO terms, is 'the worldwide spread of a disease'.

COVID-19 spreads in a similar way to flu, where there is close contact between people. If someone with the virus coughs or exhales and is within a metre of someone else, the other person could catch it by breathing in droplets of infected fluid. People can also catch it by touching contaminated surfaces or objects. Most people infected with the virus have mild symptoms and recover, but some experience more serious illness and may need hospital care. People over 40 seem to be more vulnerable, as are those with weakened immune systems or an underlying health condition such as diabetes, cancer

and lung disease.

The incubation period of COVID-19 is between 2 and 14 days. Common signs of infection include a fever, a cough and difficulty in breathing.

On 12 March the Government announced that the UK was moving from the 'contain' into the 'delay' stage of the outbreak; the risk to the public was raised from moderate to high by the UK Chief Medical Officers.

How employers should respond to the COVID-19 threat

As the virus is now spreading through community transmission in the UK, all employers and workers are being affected in some way. People's health and well-being, and stringent measures to prevent the virus from spreading, should be at the heart of every employer's response.

We'll continue to signpost latest developments, collate and publish updated resources, more detailed guidance and FAQs on our [Responding to the coronavirus hub](#).

Be informed and prepared

- **Keep up to date with Government and public health advice:** This is a very fast-moving issue. Employers should keep up to date daily with the situation as it develops, and refer employees who are concerned about infection, using official and expert medical sources such as [GOV.UK](#), the [National Health Service](#) and [NHS 111 online coronavirus service](#). Government information is being updated regularly.
- **Use the basic but effective hygiene protection measures to help prevent the infection's spread,** including:
 - Making sure your workplace is clean and hygienic.
 - Promoting regular and thorough hand-washing by everyone.
 - Providing all employees with an alcohol-based hand rub.
 - Encouraging people to use and bin tissues.

On 7 April, the Government issued sector guidance with tailored advice on how employers should implement [social distancing measures for different workplace scenarios](#).

- **The Foreign and Commonwealth Office now advises British nationals against all but essential international travel**, as countries respond to the pandemic including introducing travel and border restrictions. Any country or area may restrict travel without notice. Check out the Government's [travel advice](#).
- The Government and public health advice is that anyone with certain symptoms (such as a high temperature of 37.8 degrees or above and/or a new, continuous cough) must **self-isolate at home** for seven days from when the symptoms started. People in this situation do not have to call NHS 111 to go into self-isolation. If you live with others and you are the first in the household to have symptoms of coronavirus, then you must stay at home for 7 days, but all other household members who remain well must stay at home and not leave the house for 14 days. The 14-day period starts from the day when the first person in the house became ill. The NHS is no longer testing people who are self-isolating with mild symptoms. Read the Government's ['stay at home' guidance](#).
- The Government has recently expanded its **COVID-19 testing framework**. The [guidance](#) covers who is eligible, how to get tested and the different types of tests. It offers an employer portal for employers to refer essential workers who are self-isolating because they or members of their household have symptoms. There's also an online [self-referral portal](#) for essential workers to apply for a test themselves.
- As part of its strategy to enforce [social distancing](#), on 20 March the Government announced that all pubs, restaurants and other entertainment/hospitality premises would close and that people should only travel if absolutely necessary. On 23 March, the Prime Minister [addressed the nation](#) and instructed people to '**stay at home**' to stop the disease spreading between households. In a [second address](#) on 10 May, the Prime Minister changed this advice to '**stay alert**'. He also announced the 'first careful steps to modify lockdown measures, including that 'anyone who can't work from home, for instance those in construction or manufacturing, should be actively encouraged to go to work'. The devolved administrations of Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland have not followed suit.
- On 11 May, the UK Government published its COVID-19 recovery strategy, [Our plan to rebuild](#), as well as new '[COVID-19 secure](#)' guidelines for UK employers to help them encourage a **safe return to the workplace**. While the government in England is actively encouraging those who cannot work from home to return to work there is no legal obligation to do so. We are urging businesses to ensure they can meet **three key tests** before bringing their people back to the workplace:
 - **Is it essential?** If people can continue to work from home, they must continue to do that for the foreseeable future. If they cannot work from home, is their work deemed essential or could the business continue to use the

Government's Job Retention Scheme for longer, giving the time needed to put safety measures and clear employee guidance and consultation in place?

- **Is it safe?** Employers have a duty of care to identify and manage risks to ensure that the workplace is sufficiently safe to return to. Employers should take their time with gradual returns to work to test health and safety measures in practice and ensure they can work with larger numbers before encouraging more of their workforce back.
- **Is it mutually agreed?** It's vital that there's a clear dialogue between employers and their people so concerns such as commuting by public transport can be raised, and individuals' needs and worries taken into account. There needs to be flexibility on both sides to accommodate different working times or schedules to manage these issues.
- The Government has announced a package of measures to support businesses and workers during the pandemic, including a Coronavirus Job Retention Scheme whereby all UK employers will be able to access a financial subsidy worth 80% of their workers' wage costs up to a cap of £2,500 per worker per month. Affected employees need to be classed as 'furloughed workers' to be eligible for the scheme. On 26 March the Government published guidance for employers and employees on how the scheme operates, eligibility and how to make a claim. On 12 May the Government announced an extension of the furlough scheme to the end of October 2020. It will continue in its current form until end of June, but new flexibility will be introduced from August to get employees back to work. More information will be available on these changes by the end of May. Other business support measures include small business grants, business rate holidays for some sectors and other targeted grants and loan facilities. A dedicated webpage has more detail on the Government's business support measures and how to apply and there's further advice for businesses and employees in Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland. On 20 April the Government launched its online portal where employers can submit claims under the scheme. On 26 March the Government unveiled a Self-Employed Income Support Scheme comprising a direct cash grant worth up to 80% of their profits up to £2,500 per month.
- **Regularly review your contingency plan:** By now every organisation should have assessed its own level of exposure to business disruption caused by the virus and developed a contingency plan. You should have a **contingency team** in place to take responsibility for operating it and regularly reviewing the plan to ensure it's still fit for purpose. This should include considering the necessary steps to **prepare for easing of the lockdown** and a safe return to the workplace, although this should be gradual and phased. People's health and safety should be paramount and physical

distancing still applies, as our [Returning to the workplace guide](#) makes clear.

Look after people's health well-being and safety

Employees' health, safety and well-being during this pandemic 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. Employers need to be proactive to protect their people and minimise the risk of the virus spreading. The Government has now instructed people not to avoid using public transport when travelling to work. Employers' duty of care for the health and safety of their employees includes anyone who is working remotely.

Many people will be concerned about the risk of infection and will need reassurance. Communicate clearly to employees that they need to take basic hygiene precautions, such as effective hand-washing, and avoid all non-essential travel and social contact to help reduce the spread of the virus. Follow official public health and medical advice closely and advise them on what to do if they think they may have caught the virus, or are at risk of contracting it. If you've shifted your workforce to [home working](#), make sure you keep in touch with people and look out for their well-being as it can be an isolating experience. Encourage managers to have one-to-ones with people and set up virtual team meetings.

Self-isolation and Statutory Sick Pay (SSP)

Many people will need to self-isolate based on [official guidance](#).

The Government has announced a range of new measures around SSP. If employee or worker needs to self-isolate, they are entitled to SSP. This includes individuals who have been told to self-isolate by a doctor or NHS 111, those who have COVID-19, or who have the symptoms, or if someone in their household has symptoms. It also applies to people caring for those in the same household who display COVID-19 symptoms and have been told to self-isolate.

The Government has also announced that [Statutory Sick Pay will be made available from day one](#) (instead of from day four) for those affected by coronavirus when self-isolating. Employers with less than 250 employees can claim a refund for COVID-19 related SSP costs (up to two weeks per employee).

Medical evidence for SSP

Employees can currently self-certify for the first seven days. Government advice is that employers should use discretion around the need for medical evidence beyond that for absence where an employee has to self-isolate in the current exceptional circumstances. The Government has introduced a temporary alternative to the current fit note for the duration of the COVID-19 outbreak whereby those in self-isolation can obtain a notification via [NHS 111](#) to use as evidence for absence from work.

An alternative option to providing sick pay is to allow people who are asked to self-isolate, but are not unwell, to work from home wherever possible, and continue to pay as normal.

School closures

Following the Government's announcement that all schools in the UK will close from 20 March, employers should expect some disruption to a person's ability to work as normal, depending on their child's age. However, schools and all childcare providers are being asked to continue to provide care for a limited number of children - children who are vulnerable, and children whose parents are critical to the Covid-19 response and cannot be safely cared for at home. Parents whose work is critical to the COVID-19 response include those who work in health and social care and in other key sectors outlined in the [Department for Education guidance](#). As schools and nurseries remain closed, decisions about encouraging employees to return to the workplace need to factor in the ability of working parents to access childcare.

Hopefully, many working parents can work from home. Employers should consider flexible approaches to how people can carry out their role, for example reducing or changing their hours of work in consultation with the individual. Alternatively, some may choose to take this time off as holiday, so normal processes and pay apply there. If an employee is unable to work from home, hopefully many employers will continue to pay their salary as normal. Alternatively, this could be granted as [emergency time off](#) or unpaid [parental leave](#).

Wider health and well-being concerns

- Reassure employees if they have concerns, and keep them well informed about your organisation's policies and contingency plans, particularly in relation to the specific guidelines for employees who have been in contact with an infected person or have symptoms of the virus.
- Make sure everyone, including managers, understands which sick pay and leave policies apply and how these will be implemented. Actively communicate this advice with your people, customers and suppliers.

- Implement an internal communication strategy so that employees are aware of measures 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 in a higher-risk group. It's important to strike the balance between your organisation and its people being prepared for the significant spread of the virus whilst reassuring people that there is no need to panic. Ensure that line managers are regularly informed about the organisation's contingency and return-to-work plans and how to discuss the situation with any concerned employees. They also need to know and where to signpost people to for further advice or support, including employee assistance programmes and/or counselling if they are anxious.
- Promote the resources you have available to support people's health and well-being generally, including those through an employee assistance programme. If large numbers of people are now working from home in line with government advice, provide ongoing support and communications. Some could start to feel socially isolated and/or anxious about the situation. Make sure you listen to any concerns, and that they take care of their mental well-being. Mental health charity Mind has published guidance on coronavirus and well-being.
- Now that the virus is spreading widely and the risk of infection is heightened, be prepared to increase 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 condition, or disability, age, or pregnancy, and be aware of the additional duties you have as an employer to these specific groups of employees.

Develop flexible resourcing plans

- Government guidance states that 'businesses and workplaces should make every possible effort to enable working from home as a first option. Where working from home is not possible, workplaces should make every effort to comply with the social distancing guidelines set out by the government'.
- As part of your contingency plan, introduce more flexible resourcing strategies to maintain essential services or production in case of staffing shortages due to people becoming ill and/or self-isolating. If roles can't be performed at home and are essential, consider more innovative resourcing solutions that may need to be deployed, such as split shifts to cover essential operations or services.
- Carry out a resourcing risk assessment of the organisation, identifying essential areas of the business where few employees have the required skills. Consider

training additional employees in these skills, particularly if you have furloughed some employees. 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.

- Develop plans to enable your 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.
- Maximise the use of technology to facilitate remote 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. Issue staff with laptops and IT support so they can work remotely wherever possible. Support their health and safety, for example by carrying out risk assessments using self-completion questionnaires that can be completed remotely.
- 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. The Government has changed the rules on carrying over annual leave to support key industries during COVID-19 so workers who haven't taken all their statutory annual leave will be able to carry it over into the next two leave years.
- 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 and further reading

Contacts

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

[UK Government - COVID-19: guidance for employers and businesses](#)

[UK Government – Coronavirus business support](#)

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

[Acas – Coronavirus advice for employers and employees](#)

[World Health Organization - Coronavirus disease \(COVID-19\) outbreak](#)

Books and reports

DEPARTMENT OF HEALTH AND SOCIAL CARE. (2020) *Coronavirus action plan*. London: DHSC.

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Journal articles

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CHURCHILL, F. (2020) [Staff anxiety the biggest coronavirus challenge for businesses, survey finds](#). *People Management* (online). 20 March.

HOWLETT, E. (2020) [What can HR learn from Europe's staggered return to work?](#) *People Management* (online). 20 April.

LETCHFIELD, H. (2020) [How to help working parents avoid burnout during lockdown](#). *People Management* (online). 22 April.

Explore more on the [People Management coronavirus hub](#).

This factsheet was last updated by Rachel Suff.