

CORONAVIRUS COVID-19



WHAT SHOULD EMPLOYERS DO?

A Corporate Guideline with targeted information for employees, managers and corporate custodians

In January 2020, The World Health Organization (WHO) declared the outbreak of the new coronavirus in Hubei Province, China, to be a Public Health Emergency of International Concern. While COVID-19 continues to spread across the world, there is still much to be learned about its transmission, severity and other features.



Businesses should be aware of the known facts of the virus and how it could impact them, considering plans to manage exposure should the need arise. The Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) has published Interim Guidance for Businesses and Employers, which could be useful in forming a corporate plan of action, in the instance of a COVID-19 outbreak. It includes the following points:

1. Encourage employees with flu symptoms to stay at home.

COVID-19 infection is only likely if someone has been in an area with possible exposure to a confirmed or suspected case of COVID-19 and display symptoms that include fever and trouble breathing.

Employees who have other respiratory illnesses should probably also stay at home and not return to work until their fever has subsided for at least 24 hours (without the use of fever-reducing medicines). They should advise their supervisor if they are sick and keep them updated. Influenza and COVID-19 coronavirus are not the same but they are transmitted in similar ways and the impact of influenza should also be taken into consideration.

The National Institute for Communicable Diseases has warned businesses that 11,000 South Africans died as a result of influenza in 2019 alone. Therefore, caution to avoid transmission of both of these serious respiratory diseases.

At this time, it is important that sick leave policies are flexible and consistent with public health guidance and that employees are aware of this. Sick employees who are infectious may try to continue to work, if they fear their health benefits may fall away.

Advise agencies or companies that provide temporary or contract workers to follow the same protocol with regards to sick workers and encourage them to develop non-punitive leave policies.

Relax the rules about having a medical certificate from a health provider to validate time off work, as medical facilities or healthcare providers could be under strain and unable to provide certificates timeously.

Employees with sick family members should be permitted to stay home and care for them. Employers should be aware and prepared that more employees may need to stay at home to care for sick family members than usual.

2. Separate sick employees.

Any employees arriving at their place of work with symptoms of acute respiratory illness (fever, cough, shortness of breath), or those developing symptoms during the work day, should be separated from other employees immediately, and sent home.

3. Emphasise the importance of respiratory etiquette and hand hygiene for all employees.

Place posters that encourage staying at home when sick, coughing and sneezing etiquette and hand hygiene at the entrance to the workplace and in communal areas where they are likely to be seen. Provide tissues and no-touch disposal receptacles for employee use, as well as alcohol-based hand sanitiser, soap and water, in good supply.

4. Perform routine environmental cleaning.

All touched surfaces, such as work stations, door knobs and countertops should be routinely cleaned, with the usual cleaning agents. Provide disposable wipes for employees to wipe down surfaces regularly, including telephones, remote controls and keyboards.

5. Review the need for travel and if necessary, advise and prepare employees accordingly.

Check the CDC's Traveller Health Notices, for specific information and recommendations on travel and COVID-19. Advise employees on the risks, the symptoms and what to do if they feel sick while travelling. Emphasise how important it is for employees who feel they might be sick, to inform their supervisor, as well as the appropriate healthcare provider.

Since the incubation period of COVID-19 is known to be 14 days, it is important that any employees who have travelled, monitor themselves carefully for symptoms after they have returned.

Any employees who fall into the high-risk category of contracting COVID-19 – older employees or those with existing medical conditions like diabetes, heart or lung disease – should not travel for business.

It is very important during this time not to make determinations of risk based on race or country of origin.

The plan should address how to keep the business running, even if employees, contractors and suppliers are unable to come to their place of work, due to travel restrictions or if they are ill or having to care for the sick. Quite importantly, the plan should also address the mental health and social consequences of an outbreak in the workplace or community and offer support and information. Once a plan has been developed, it is advisable to share it with other businesses in the community.

One of the best actions you can take as an employer or corporate custodian is to stay informed, both of new developments or discoveries about the coronavirus, and the situation reports as to its spread. WHO head, Tedros Adhanom Ghebreyesus, said in a recent news conference,

“This is a time for facts, not fear. This is a time for rationality, not rumours. This is a time for solidarity, not stigma.”