



H&S ALERT



Infectious Diseases – Coronavirus disease (CONVID-19)

Coronaviruses are a group of viruses that cause diseases in mammals and birds. In humans, coronaviruses cause respiratory tract infections that are typically mild, such as the common cold, though rarer forms such as SARS, MERS and COVID-19 can be lethal.

Coronavirus disease 2019 (COVID-19) is an infectious disease caused by SARS-CoV-2, a virus closely related to the SARS virus. It is primarily spread between people by small droplets from infected individuals when they cough. Time from exposure to onset of symptoms is generally between 2 and 14 days

What are the symptoms of coronavirus?

The initial symptoms are similar to other respiratory illnesses - such as the flu or the common cold

Other symptoms of the coronavirus include a fever, diarrhoea, a dry cough, shortness of breath and general body aches. Some patients have also reported confusion and fatigue. In severe cases, coronavirus can cause a high fever, kidney failure and pneumonia.

How does coronavirus spread?

Coronaviruses are typically spread through the air, with infected people coughing or sneezing, or by close personal contact, such as shaking contaminated hands.

It's also possible to be infected by touching an object or surface with the virus on it, and then touching your mouth, nose or eyes before washing your hands.

How can you protect yourself?

The primary advice is using soap and water to wash your hands, it is seen as the best way to get rid of bacteria.

Hand sanitiser can be used as a temporary measure, however it is not as effective, but it is better than nothing, especially if you've been out in public. Medical advice stipulates that using too much hand sanitiser is never a good idea as it causes severe drying of the skin, which can lead to cracking. Cracks could potentially increase your risk of coronavirus infection.

The medical advice further explains that there's very little evidence that face masks on sale actually help with reducing your risk of catching the virus, a tissue would work just as well.

Taking public transport should be safe, as long as you're careful. Whenever you are in close contact with other people for a period of time, your risk of catching an infection is increased. This doesn't just apply to coronavirus but too many other viruses and bacteria too. However, as far as we currently know, coronavirus is spread by infected people coughing or sneezing out virus-filled droplets.

So if people cover their mouths and noses with a tissue when coughing or sneezing, instead of using their bare hands and then touching their infected hands against surfaces on the bus or underground - the risk of spreading the infection will be reduced. If you're in an airport or using public transport, you should be especially vigilant about not touching surfaces and then your mouth or nose. The NHS do not typically recommend that people wear a paper mask.



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Business and Employee Risks

So far more than 7,000 people in the UK have been tested, with at least 15 confirmed positive cases, leading the government to declare the virus a 'serious and imminent threat' to the British public. With this UK threat level escalating and businesses forced to send staff home, Companies must prepare now for instances of quarantining employees and even employees quarantining themselves. This will must be seen as a strategic approach by both your H&S and HR experts combined.

Matt Hancock, UK health secretary, warned the public to brace for more cases as he laid out the government's 'four-point plan', and urged travellers returning from infected areas, designated as special care zones, to self-isolate and call the NHS 111 service, even if they had no symptoms.

Typically, being asked to work from home is a welcome event. But for 300 London-based Chevron workers this was not necessarily good news. The US oil company's London Canary Wharf office was emptied on Tuesday (25 February) after an employee who had recently returned from a country affected by coronavirus reported flu-like symptoms. The company followed government guidelines stipulating that anyone at risk of having contracted the virus must isolate themselves for a period of 14 days. This could effectively close your business, so plan now.

There have been no calls yet for a shutdown of businesses like the one seen in Wuhan, China, ground-zero of the current outbreak. But concerns have particularly escalated following 11 towns in Italy – home to a total of 55,000 people – being quarantined, with no one allowed to enter or leave the towns without special permission.

So it is likely H&S and HR professionals will face increased instances of staff imposed and self-isolating over the coming days, and will need to consider now how to approach this.

If an employer has specifically told an employee not to come into the workplace because they have been to an affected area, they would "ordinarily get their normal pay", and employees who are actually ill because of coronavirus would be entitled to statutory sick pay or contractual sick pay.

But what if an employee chooses to self-isolate rather than the business imposing this?

ACAS guidelines states, if an employee has been told to self-isolate by a medical expert, they have had to go into quarantine or are not able to travel back to the UK, there is no statutory right to pay. But industry advice is that paying the employee is in everyone's best interest, as staff concerns surrounding not getting paid could lead to some attempting to come into work when they shouldn't.

If an employee is quarantined and their time off would be considered unpaid, it may be worthwhile for you to consider the absence as sick leave and comply with any sick pay requirements

All employers have a duty of care towards employees and non-employees to provide a safe work environment under Section 2 of the HSAWA, allowing employees back to work may violate this Act. Employees also have a duty to look after their own health and safety and that of their colleagues, which includes following self-isolation advice and cooperating with the employer to ensure a safe workplace. If an employee is adamant they wish to return to work, you may decide to suspend the employee on health and safety grounds, in such a case the employee in question would have to be paid as normal.

Consistency across your Company is key and employers must ensure no employee is singled out because of their diversity. This also holds if employers choose not to pay employees who self-isolate. While this is not unlawful, employers should be consistent in their approach if more than one employee is affected, to avoid claims of less favourable treatment.

Companies need to take care not to cause unnecessary alarm, and ensure any steps they take are reasonable.

For bespoke H&S and HR advice, please speak to H&KSS for further assistance and Policy formation