

Coronavirus Disease (COVID-19) and Businesses Information for Administrators and Employees

Background

Several countries across the world are experiencing expanding outbreaks of respiratory illness (COVID-19) caused by a novel coronavirus (SARS CoV-2). The virus is spreading from person-to-person and cases are confirmed in the United States.

Currently, the immediate risk to the general public in Washington and the United States is still considered to be low. There is no evidence that COVID-19 is spreading in Washington at this time.

As new information emerges, please remind your community that *the risk of novel coronavirus is not at all connected with race, ethnicity or nationality*. [Stigma will not help to fight the illness](#). Do not make determinations of risk based on race or country of origin, and be sure to maintain confidentiality of people with confirmed coronavirus infection. Sharing accurate information during a time of heightened concern is one of the best things we can do to keep rumors and misinformation from spreading. The [CDC website](#) is an excellent source of information.

What is a coronavirus?

Coronaviruses are a large family of viruses that usually cause mild respiratory illnesses such as the common cold. Some coronaviruses have caused more severe illness, such as Severe Acute Respiratory Syndrome (SARS) and Middle East Respiratory Syndrome (MERS). SARS-CoV-2 is a new coronavirus (responsible for COVID-19) that was not identified in humans before December 2019.

What are common symptoms of COVID-19 illness?

Patients with COVID-19 have had mild to severe respiratory illness with symptoms of fever, cough, and shortness of breath. It takes 2 to 14 days after a person gets the virus in their body to become ill. Novel coronavirus is new, and we are learning more each day about symptoms it causes and how long it takes for people to become sick.

How does the virus spread?

Most often, it is spread from person-to-person via respiratory droplets produced when an infected person coughs or sneezes, similar to how flu and other respiratory pathogens spread. These droplets can land in the mouths or noses of people who are nearby or possibly be inhaled into the lungs.

It's currently unclear if a person can get COVID-19 by touching a surface or object that has the virus on it and then touching their own mouth, nose, or possibly their eyes. Often, with most respiratory viruses, people are thought to be most contagious when they are most symptomatic (the sickest) but there is some indication of spread by individuals who are not exhibiting typical symptoms.

Who should seek medical evaluation for COVID-19?

Staff, and subcontracted individuals who are:

- Ill with a fever, cough, or difficulty breathing AND have traveled from an affected area in the last 14 days
- Ill with fever, cough, or difficulty breathing AND have been identified by Public Health as a recent close contact of a confirmed COVID-19 case or had recent close contact with someone who is being evaluated for COVID-19 infection.

What should I do if I suspect a staff member is at risk for COVID-19?

If a staff member, or administrative personnel meets the above criteria, it is important to place them in a private room away from others and ask them to wear a face mask. Immediately notify your [local health department](#). They will provide you with guidance.

If you need this document in an alternative format, call 800.525.0127 (for TDD/TTY call 711).

Should staff delay or suspend travel to affected areas?

- Check the CDC's Traveler's Health Notices for the latest guidance and recommendations for each country to which employees may travel. This can be found at on the [CDC website](#).
- Advise employees to check themselves for symptoms of acute respiratory illness before starting travel and notify their supervisor and stay home if they are sick.
- Ensure employees who become sick while traveling or on temporary assignment understand that they should notify their supervisor and should promptly call a healthcare provider for advice if needed.
- If outside the United States, sick employees should follow your company's policy for obtaining medical care or contact a healthcare provider or overseas medical assistance company to assist them with finding an appropriate healthcare provider in that country. A U.S. consular officer can help locate healthcare services. However, U.S. embassies, consulates, and military facilities do not have the legal authority, capability, and resources to evacuate or give medicines, vaccines, or medical care to private U.S. citizens overseas.
- Encourage employees who travel to receive all recommended vaccinations, including influenza. It's not too late to vaccinate.

As with any newly emerging infectious disease, knowledge evolves with time.

Early on, it is difficult to know the ways in which the disease spreads, how effectively it spreads from person to person, and how severe the infection is. We will continue to update the [DOH novel coronavirus website](#) as more information becomes available.

What can I do to prepare for COVID-19 impacts to my workplace? Plan Now!

All employers need to consider how best to decrease the spread of acute respiratory illness and lower the impact of COVID-19 in their workplace in the event of an outbreak in the US. Identify and communicate objectives, including one or more of the following: (a) reducing transmission among staff, (b) protecting people who are at higher risk for adverse health complications, (c) maintaining business operations, and (d) minimizing effects on other entities in the supply chains. Some of the **key considerations** when making decisions on appropriate responses are:

- **Disease severity** (i.e., number of people who are sick, hospitalization and death rates) in the community where the business is located. Since the intensity of an outbreak may differ according to geographic location, local health officials may be issuing guidance specific to their communities
- **Impact of disease on employees that are vulnerable** and may be at higher risk for adverse health complications. Inform employees that some people may be at higher risk for severe illness, such as older adults and those with chronic medical conditions.
- **Prepare for possible increased numbers of absences** due to illness in employees and their family members, dismissals of early childhood programs and K-12 schools due to high levels of absenteeism or illness:
 - Employers should plan to monitor and respond to absenteeism at the workplace. Implement plans to continue your essential business functions in case you experience higher than usual absenteeism.
 - Cross-train personnel to perform essential functions so that the workplace is able to operate even if key staff members are absent.
 - Assess your essential functions and the reliance that others and the community have on your services or products. Be prepared to change your business practices if needed to maintain critical operations (e.g., identify alternative suppliers, prioritize customers, or temporarily suspend some of your operations if needed).
 - Employers with more than one business location are encouraged to provide local managers with the authority to take appropriate actions outlined in their business infectious disease outbreak response plan based on the condition in each locality.

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What can I do to prevent COVID-19 illnesses my workplace? Implement the Following Strategies Now!

- **Actively encourage sick employees to stay home:**
 - Employees who have symptoms of acute respiratory illness are recommended to stay home and not come to work until they are free of fever (100.4° F [37.8° C] or greater using an oral thermometer), signs of a fever, and any other symptoms for at least 72 hours, without the use of fever-reducing or other symptom-altering medicines (e.g. cough suppressants). Employees should notify their supervisor and stay home if they are sick.
 - Ensure that your sick leave policies are flexible and consistent with public health guidance and that employees are aware of these policies.
 - Talk with companies that provide your business with contract or temporary employees about the importance of sick employees staying home and encourage them to develop non-punitive leave policies.
 - Do not require a healthcare provider's note for employees who are sick with acute respiratory illness to validate their illness or to return to work, as healthcare providers may be extremely busy and not able to provide such documentation in a timely way.
 - Maintain flexible policies that permit employees to stay home to care for a sick family member. Employers should be aware that more employees may need to stay at home to care for sick children or other sick family members than is usual.
- **Separate employees who become ill at work:**
 - CDC recommends that employees who appear to have acute respiratory illness symptoms (i.e. cough, shortness of breath) upon arrival to work or become sick during the day **should be separated from other employees and be sent home immediately**. Sick employees should cover their noses and mouths with a tissue when coughing or sneezing (or an elbow or shoulder if no tissue is available).
- **Emphasize respiratory etiquette and hand hygiene by all employees:**
 - Place posters that encourage [staying home when sick](#), [cough and sneeze etiquette](#), and [hand hygiene](#) at the entrance to your workplace and in other workplace areas where they are likely to be seen.
 - Provide tissues and no-touch disposal receptacles for use by employees.
 - Instruct employees to clean their hands often with an alcohol-based hand sanitizer that contains at least 60-95% alcohol, or wash their hands with soap and water for at least 20 seconds. **Soap and water should be used preferentially if hands are visibly dirty.**
 - Advise employees to avoid touching their eyes, nose, and mouth with unwashed hands.
 - Provide soap and water and alcohol-based hand rubs in the workplace. Ensure that adequate supplies are maintained. Place hand rubs in multiple locations or in conference rooms to encourage hand hygiene.
 - Visit the [coughing and sneezing etiquette](#) and [clean hands webpage](#) for more information.
- **Perform routine environmental cleaning:** (for more information, refer to [CDC website](#) for businesses)
 - Routinely clean all frequently touched surfaces in the workplace, such as workstations, countertops, and doorknobs. Use the cleaning agents that are usually used in these areas and follow the directions on the label.
 - No additional disinfection beyond routine cleaning is recommended at this time.
 - Provide disposable wipes so that commonly used surfaces (for example, doorknobs, keyboards, remote controls, desks) can be wiped down by employees before each use

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Involve your Human Resources department or Employee Health for further guidance or under the following circumstances:

- Employees who are well but who have a sick family member at home with COVID-19 should notify their supervisor and refer to CDC guidance for [how to conduct a risk assessment](#) of their potential exposure. Family medical leave or other legal contracts may apply.
- If an employee is confirmed to have COVID-19 infection, employers should inform fellow employees of their possible exposure to COVID-19 in the workplace but **maintain confidentiality** as required by the Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA). Employees exposed to a co-worker with confirmed COVID-19 should refer to CDC guidance for [how to conduct a risk assessment](#) of their potential exposure.

Where can I turn for more information?

- [Novel Coronavirus Outbreak 2020](#), Washington State Department of Health
- [2019 Novel Coronavirus, Wuhan, China](#), Centers for Disease Control and Prevention
- [Guidance for Travelers](#), Centers for Disease Control and Prevention
- [OSHA guidance](#)
- Washington State Department of Health novel coronavirus call center: 1-800-525-0127 and press #