Minimising the risk of exposure to COVID-19: Office workers

The model Work Health and Safety (WHS) laws require all employers to take care of the health and safety of their workers (staff, contractors, volunteers) and others (clients, customers and visitors) at the workplace. This includes:

> providing and maintaining a work environment that is without risk to health and safety; and

> providing adequate facilities for staff to carry out their work.

Employers must identify risks at the workplace, and where possible eliminate or minimise those risks. The model WHS laws also place a duty on 'officers' to exercise due diligence to ensure that the employer complies with their duties or obligations under the model WHS Act.

In office work environment, an officer will include the director or secretary of a corporation, as well as the people who:

> make, or participate in making, significant decisions that affect the whole, or a substantial part, of the business, or

> have the capacity to significantly affect the business' financial standing.

Where an officer is found to have breached the model WHS laws, they can be personally fined or imprisoned.

If your workplace has been determined an essential service by government and you are permitted to continue operating, you must ensure any risks to your workers are eliminated or minimised as much as is reasonably practicable.

Where possible, to eliminate the risk of exposure to the COVID-19 in the workplace, businesses may allow their workers to work from home in complete isolation from others. If it is not feasible for workers to perform their job from home, employers must do all that they can to minimise the risk of exposure to COVID-19 so far as reasonably practicable.

Managing the risks of exposure to the COVID-19 virus

Physical distancing

One of the most effective ways to minimise the spread of the COVID-19 virus is to limit physical proximity between staff. Practical measures to encourage physical distancing include:

> allowing staff to work from home, if practicable, creating additional floor space in the usual office environment
> calculating the area of each workspace or floor and directing those workers remaining in the office environment to space an appropriate distance apart to continue performing their duties
> rotating shifts (early morning, afternoon/evening), compressing hours, changing start and finish times, so that there are less staff in the office at one time or having staff doing one day on, one day off rotations.
> not allowing use of meeting rooms or other spaces that wouldn't allow for the required spacing
    > discouraging use of public transport if possible, or if not feasible, recommending that workers:
    > travel at off peak times
    > wash or sanitise hands before and after travelling on public transport, and
    > maintain social distancing measures during any trip.
> Encouraging workers to travel to meetings separately (e.g. don't share a taxi)
> for customer facing workers, creating floor markings that provide minimum guide distances between clients queuing for service and using physical barriers where possible, and
> encouraging workers to socially distance themselves in break rooms and when using lifts.

Hygiene

Environmental cleaning

The amount of time the COVID-19 virus survives on inanimate objects and surfaces will vary. Environmental cleaning is one way to remove the virus that causes COVID-19. Employers should ensure:

> they provide surface wipes to clean workstations, and workstation equipment such as monitors, phones, keyboards and mouses
> that frequently touched surfaces such as doors, handrails, windows and vending machines are cleaned and disinfected frequently using appropriate detergent and disinfectant solutions, and
> that people cleaning the workplace wear gloves and use alcohol-based hand sanitiser before and after wearing gloves.

See the Department of Health information sheet on [environmental cleaning and disinfection-principles for COVID-19](#) for further information.

Worker Hygiene

Workers should be required to practice good hygiene, including:

> frequent hand washing
> limiting contact with others, including through shaking hands
> covering their mouths while coughing or sneezing.

Washroom facilities for workers should have adequate facilities for good hygiene such as adequate supply of soap, water and toilet paper. These must be kept clean, properly stocked and in good working order. Supplies of hand sanitiser should be provided around the office space, where possible.

Staff should also be informed about the risk of exposure and good hygiene through increased signage and information. The Australian Government Department of Health has a range [of](#)

posters and other resources aimed at educating the public about COVID-19. These posters can be placed in client-facing work environments.

General advice for workers, customers and others

> Avoid touching your mouth, eyes, and nose with unwashed (or gloved) hands.
> Clean your hands thoroughly for at least 20 seconds using soap and water, or alcohol based hand rub.
> Cover your nose and mouth when coughing and sneezing with a tissue or a flexed elbow. Put tissues in the bin.
> Avoid close contact with anyone with cold or flu-like symptoms.
> Social distancing- maintain a 1.5 metre distance to others (two arms length).
> Stay home if you are sick.
> Seek medical advice if you have a fever, cough, sore throat or shortness of breath (call your doctor or healthdirect on 1800 022 222).

Consultation and communicating with workers

You must consult with your workers on health and safety matters relating to COVID-19. Allow workers to express views before you make any decisions.

Workers are most likely to know about the risks of their work. Involving them will help build commitment to this process and any changes.

The model Code of Practice: Work health and safety consultation, cooperation and coordination can provide more information about your duties to consult.

You need to communicate clearly with workers about control measures. Provide clear direction and guidance about what is expected of workers.

Workers should know:

> when to stay away from the workplace
> what action to take if they become unwell
> what symptoms to be concerned about.

Remind workers they have a duty to take reasonable care for their own health and safety and to not adversely affect the health and safety of others.

Provide workers with a point of contact to discuss their concerns, and access to support services, including employee assistance programs.

How can I meet my officer duty during the COVID-19 outbreak?

> Keep your knowledge of the COVID-19 situation up-to-date. Follow advice from authoritative sources such as the Australian Government Department of Health and check daily for any updates to safety advice.
> Understand your business and its WHS hazards and risks. It may not be possible because of the work you do to facilitate all workers to work from home, but there are many steps you can take to minimise the risks in an office environment.
> Make sure your office is properly resourced to manage WHS risks during the COVID-19 outbreak, and check that the resources are being used.
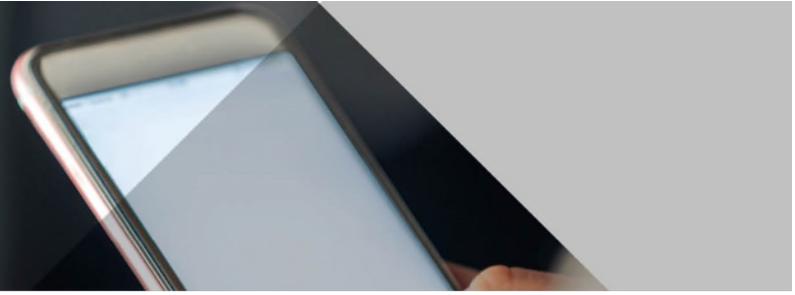
> Review your policies, procedures and reporting process to ensure they remain current for any incidents, hazards and other WHS issues that arise during this time. Update these materials if necessary.
> Ensure all that these are communicated clearly and processes are being followed.
> Consult with workers and ensure there is a means for them to raise any concerns about the steps you are taking to manage the risks.

Further information

> For general advice for employers on managing risks to exposure to the COVID-19 virus, go to COVID-19 Information for workplaces
> For further information on risk management, see the model Code of Practice: How to manage work health and safety risks.