



**Getting ready for
COVID-19
at the workplace**



Getting ready for COVID-19 – occupational health and safety considerations

The World Health Organisation and public health authorities around the world are taking action to contain the COVID-19 outbreak. However, long term success cannot be taken for granted and depends on all sections of society – including businesses and employers – to play a role if the spread of this disease is to be stopped and or controlled.

In addition, the safeguard of occupational health and safety is not only a fundamental right of workers, but it is the obligation of an employer to take effective measures so that workers are not exposed to unreasonable and uncontrolled risks. Thus, any action which is required to be taken must follow the recommendations or instructions given by the Maltese public health authorities as well as be in conformity with the spirit and requirements of the Occupational Health and Safety Authority Act 2000.

On their part, workers are also duty bound to cooperate with their employer on the measures indicated to them by their employer to ensure health and safety at the place of work.

In most workplaces, the risk of workers becoming infected by the COVID-19 virus can increase once there is local community transmission of the virus. Thus it is important that COVID-19 is considered as a workplace risk and included in the risk assessments normally carried out at places of work. The evaluation of the risk should take into consideration a number of factors, including the risk of workers coming into contact with an infected person (other worker or visitor to the place of work), the risk of contamination at the workplace, individual factors which can place a worker at greater risk (such as underlying medical conditions, age), and the physical characteristics of the workplace (including ventilation systems, layout of areas where there are worker-visitor interactions).

Once the level of risk is determined, preventive and protective measures should be put in place once the local health authorities determine that there is community transmission of the virus. The risk assessment should also identify requirements regarding training and the information to be given to workers about workplace policies, and the implementation of the control measures indicated.

During the risk assessment exercise workers should be consulted either individually or through their Workers Health and Safety Representatives and be given every opportunity to provide input.

COVID-19 spread

When someone who has COVID-19 coughs, sneezes or exhales, droplets of infected fluid can fall on nearby surfaces and objects such as desks, tables or telephones. People could become infected with COVID-19 by touching contaminated surfaces or objects, and then touching their eyes, nose or mouth. If they are standing within one meter of a person with COVID-19 they can become infected by breathing in droplets coughed out or exhaled by infected persons. In other words, COVID-19 spreads in a similar way to flu. Most persons infected with COVID-19 experience mild symptoms and recover. However, some go on to experience more serious illness and may require hospital care. People with weakened immune systems, the elderly and people with conditions such as diabetes, heart and lung disease are also more vulnerable to serious illness. It is important to note that people who contract COVID-19 virus are not infectious during the incubation period before the symptoms appear.

Simple ways to prevent the spread of COVID-19 at the workplace

The low-cost measures described below will help prevent the spread of infections in workplaces and help to protect employees and other persons who may be present at the place of work.

Employers should start implementing these measures now, even though there is no current community person-to-person transmission of COVID-19.

- Instruct your employees, contractors and customers that if COVID-19 starts spreading in the community anyone with even a mild cough or low-grade fever needs to stay at home, including if they have had to take simple medications which can mask symptoms of infection.

This message needs to be repeated and reinforced frequently, including by putting up posters emphasizing this message. Combine this with other communication channels commonly used in your organization or business.

- Consult the Maltese public health authorities regarding the destination and all stop-overs for business trips, and consider whether such trips are essential or not in the light of possible risks. Employees and contractors should also be advised to consult national travel advice before going on trips of any form.
- Make sure the workplace is always kept clean and hygienic.

Surfaces (e.g. desks and tables) and objects (e.g. telephones, keyboards, door handles/knobs) need to

be wiped with disinfectant or an alcohol-based proprietary agent regularly since the contamination of surfaces touched by employees and customers is one of the main ways that COVID-19 spreads. The same holds true for palm-readers and punch clocks the surfaces of which are touched by employees and therefore need regular cleaning.

- Promote regular and thorough handwashing by employees, contractors and customers.

Make sure that employees and visitors have access to places where they can wash their hands with soap and water and place sanitizing hand rub dispensers in prominent places around the workplace. Make sure these dispensers are regularly refilled.

Display posters promoting handwashing.

Combine this with other communication measures such as offering guidance from occupational health and safety practitioners, briefings at meetings and information on the intranet to promote handwashing.

- Promote good respiratory hygiene in the workplace (use tissues or elbow when sneezing or coughing).

Display posters promoting respiratory hygiene. Combine this with other communication measures such as offering guidance from occupational health and safety practitioners, briefing at meetings and information on the intranet etc.

Ensure that there is adequate ventilation in workplaces – all rooms where people can congregate, including for meetings with other employees as well as visitors to the workplace should receive an adequate supply of fresh air which is allowed to circulate unimpeded; where workplaces use a closed system of ventilation (circulating filtered air without an adequate mix with fresh air), windows and doors should be left open as much as possible.

Encourage workers to avoid congregating in improperly ventilated rooms.

Things to consider regarding travel

- **Before traveling**

Make sure your organization and its employees have the latest information on areas where COVID-19 is spreading. Based on the latest information, the organization must assess the benefits and risks related to upcoming travel plans.

Avoid sending employees who may be at higher risk of serious illness (e.g. older employees and those with medical conditions such as diabetes, heart and lung disease) to areas where COVID-19 is spreading.

Consider issuing employees who are about to travel with small bottles (under 100 cl) of alcohol-based hand rub. This can facilitate regular handwashing.

- **While traveling:**

Encourage employees to wash their hands regularly and stay at least one meter away from people who are coughing or sneezing

Ensure employees know what to do and who to contact if they feel ill while traveling.

Ensure that your employees comply with instructions from local authorities where they are traveling. If, for example, they are told by local authorities not to go somewhere they must comply with this. Your employees must comply with any local restrictions on travel, movement or large gatherings.

- **When you or your employees return from traveling:**

Employees who have returned from an area where COVID-19 is spreading must monitor themselves for symptoms for 14 days and take their temperature twice a day. Maltese public health authorities are advising self-quarantine in such instances.

If they develop even a mild cough or low-grade fever (i.e. a temperature of 37.3 C or more) they must stay at home and self-isolate. This means avoiding close contact (one metre or nearer) with other people, including family members. They must also telephone their healthcare provider or COVID Helpline 111, giving them details of their recent travel and symptoms.

Getting your business ready for when COVID-19 arrives in the Maltese community

- Develop a plan of what to do if someone becomes ill with suspected COVID-19 at work.

The plan should cover putting the ill person in a room or area where they are isolated from others in the workplace, limiting the number of people who have contact with the sick person and contacting the local health authorities (COVID Helpline 111).

Consider how to identify persons who may be at risk, and support them, without inviting stigma and discrimination into your workplace. This could include persons who have conditions that put them at higher risk of serious illness (e.g. diabetes, heart and lung disease, older age).

- Promote regular teleworking. If there is an outbreak of COVID-19 in Malta, the public health authorities may advise people to avoid public transport and crowded places. Teleworking will help maintain operations while employees stay safe.
- Develop a contingency and business continuity plan for an outbreak in the Maltese community.

The plan should consider issues on how to keep the business running even if a significant number of employees, contractors and suppliers cannot come to your place of business - either due to local restrictions on travel or because they are ill.

Communicate to your employees and contractors about the plan and make sure they are aware of what they need to do – or not do – under the plan. Emphasize key points such as the importance of staying away from work even if they have only mild symptoms or have had to take simple medications (e.g. paracetamol, ibuprofen) which may mask the symptoms

Be sure your plan addresses the mental health and social consequences of a case of COVID-19 in the workplace or in the community and offer information and support.

Other considerations

Workers who are pregnant, have recently given birth or who are breastfeeding require specific attention. Currently, there is no scientific information about the susceptibility of these workers to COVID-19, although during the normal course of pregnancy pregnant women experience immunologic and physiologic changes which might make them more susceptible to viral respiratory infections, including COVID-19. They may also be at risk for severe illness, morbidity, or mortality compared to the general population as observed in cases of other viral respiratory infections, such

as influenza, during pregnancy, while high fevers during the first trimester of pregnancy can increase the risk of certain birth defects.

Similarly there is no evidence to suggest that the COVID-19 virus can pass through the placenta to the foetus, and neither has the virus been detected in samples of amniotic fluid or breast milk.

It remains a legal obligation of employers to carry out a specific risk assessment for workers who are pregnant, have recently given birth or who are breastfeeding, however the measures required to be taken should be sensible, proportionate to the risk while adopting a precautionary approach. Essentially this means that pregnant women need only engage in usual preventive actions to avoid infection like washing hands often and avoiding people who are sick.

Remember:

Now is the time to prepare for COVID-19. Simple precautions and planning can make a big difference. Action now will help protect your employees and your business.

Always verify the source of your information and rely only on valid sources.

In short:



Getting your workplace ready for #COVID19

- Keep workplaces clean and hygienic
- Promote regular and thorough handwashing
- Promote good respiratory hygiene
- Consult national travel advice before going on business travel
- Advise those who are sick to stay home

#Coronavirus

World Health Organization

The infographic features a woman with red hair sitting at a desk with a computer monitor, talking on a mobile phone. In the background, there are several documents and a calendar on the wall. The entire graphic is set against a light green background.

This guidance document is based on the document published by the World Health Organisation entitled '**Getting your workplace ready for COVID-19**'.

How to stay informed:

<https://www.who.int/emergencies/diseases/novel-coronavirus-2019>

<https://deputyprimeminister.gov.mt/en/Pages/health.aspx>

<https://deputyprimeminister.gov.mt/en/health-promotion/Pages/Novel-coronavirus.aspx>

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