

Coronavirus and your Workplace

Outbreak of coronavirus disease 2019 (COVID-19) presents new challenges in the workplace as employers strive to keep businesses running, comply with regulations and support the health and well-being of their work force .A business response to this crisis needs to minimize the spread of the disease in the work place while reducing the risk of non-compliance with Occupational Health and Safety regulations and other employment laws.

To address these issues one needs to be ready to respond. This requires a multi-faceted plan that takes into account everything from rights of employees to confidentiality rights to record-keeping requirements.. At the same time, one needs to stay on top of issues such as social distancing and absenteeism, as well as production concerns. Your response must be flexible enough to adapt to ever-changing situation in a way that supports your entire organization.

Your response to this outbreak should be overseen by a trusted team of leaders. They can involve individuals from senior management, your legal team, safety and risk management operations, communications and human resources.

The team should put your infectious disease outbreak or pandemic plan into action, taking necessary steps on the severity of the outbreak in a given area.

It highly recommended by the authorities :

ENCOURAGE SICK EMPLOYEES TO STAY HOME

You may need to be flexible with your sick leave policy to ensure that employees do not come to work when they have coronavirus symptoms, make sure your policy is in line with guidance from public health officials.

If you have more than one location, you may need to give local managers the authority to assist to adjust your policy based on the severity of the outbreak in that area. Employers are encouraged to not require a doctor's

note from employees who are sick with acute respiratory illness, as health providers may be too busy to provide this documentation.

HOW LONG SHOULD EMPLOYEES STAY HOME?

It is highly recommended that employees stay home when they have symptoms of acute respiratory illness. They should not come to work until they:

- Are free of fever of 100.4 degrees F or greater;
- Are free of signs of fever, and
- Are free of any other symptoms for at least 24 hours

They should be free of fever and symptoms without the use of fever reducing medication or other medicine (such as cough suppressant) that alters symptoms.

ARE EMPLOYEES TO STAY HOME TO CARE FOR A FAMILY MEMBER

Employees may need care for a sick child or other relative. They also may need to deal with school and day care closings. A sick leave policy may need to be altered to cover these situations.

CLEAN THE WORK ENVIRONMENT

All frequently touched surfaces should be routinely cleaned. In addition you can provide disposable wipes to encourage employees to clean commonly touched surfaces.

Clean surfaces that are touched frequently .Areas most likely to be contaminated inter –alia, include:

- Microwave handles
- Desks and work stations
- Countertops
- Doorknobs
- Computer keyboards
- Computer mice
- Faucet handles

- Phones
- Remote Controls

Electronics can usually be cleaned with a disinfectant wipe (check the manufacturer's instructions if you are not sure whether liquid can be used)
Other surfaces that should be routinely cleaned,

Follow the directions on the label of the cleaning agent.

EMPHASIZE PREVENTIVE ACTIONS:

- Always wash hands that are visibly soiled;
- Avoid touching the eyes, nose or mouth with unwashed hands;
- Avoid close contact with people who are sick;
- Wear face mask or cover coughs and sneezes with a tissue or sleeve and
- Clean frequently touches surfaces

SEPARATE SICK EMPLOYEES

If an employee at work shows symptoms of severe respiratory illness, such as a cough or shortness of breath, separate the employee from others and the employee to the hospital or home.

IDENTIFYING AND ISOLATING SUSPECTED CASES

In all workplaces where exposure to COVID-19 may occur, prompt identification and isolation of potentially infectious individuals is a critical first step in protecting workers, visitors and others at the worksite.

Immediately isolate people suspected of having COVID-19. For example move potentially infectious people to isolation rooms and close the doors;

Take steps to limit spread of person's infectious respiratory secretions including by providing them with a face mask and asking them to wear it, if they can tolerate doing so. Note: A surgical mask on a patient or other sick person should not be confused with PPE for a worker; the mask acts to contain potentially infectious respiratory secretions at the source(i.e, the person's nose and mouth).

If possible, isolate people suspected of having COVID-19 separately from those with confirmed cases of this virus to prevent further transmission including in screening, triage or healthcare facilities.

Protect workers in close contact with the sick person by using an additional engineering and administrative control, safe work practices and PPE.

NOTE: “CLOSE CONTACT” is defined as being 6 feet. The person would be responsible to stay away (2 meters) from an infected person or within the room or care area of an infected patient for a prolonged period while not wearing recommended PPE

Close contact also includes instances where there is a direct contact infectious secretions while not wearing recommended PPE. Close contact generally does not include brief interactions, such as walking past a person.

COMMUNICATING WITH YOUR WORKFORCE

To minimize employee anxiety and avoid misinformation or spreading of rumours, communicate with employees about the actions you are taking to address issues associated with this virus. Designate a company official to be the point person when it comes to all things COVID-19. This person would be responsible for checking the Government and WHO websites regularly to stay on top of the disease’s spread and impact. Let employees know that you monitoring information and will share it.

Make sure employees are aware of:

- Your planned response to the outbreak
- Any updates on the impact the outbreak is making on your community and workplace

To get in front of your employees worries, use clear, succinct communication. Let them know, for example, that they don’t have to shake hands with others including customers, if they do not want to. You might want to get input from your employee population regarding their questions and how they prefer to receive information. Employees are likely to be especially concerned with how the outbreak will impact them and their jobs. Anticipate their concerns

and prepare a list of frequently asked questions. Your communication can include an explanation of:

- Leave policies
- Travel policies
- Separation of sick employees
- Options for remote work, and
- Pay and benefit considerations

All contract and temporary employees should receive the latest information regarding your policies. Everyone in the workplace should be aware of steps that can help control the spread of the virus and the steps your company is taking to respond to the situation.

COMMUNICATION METHODS

Use a variety of communication strategies to keep workers informed of your policies and what they should do to help contain the spread of the disease. This can include:

Emails that help employees informed of the steps your company is taking to address the effect of the outbreak;

A webpage to house information and keep employees up-to-date on any cancellations, travel restrictions or work-from-home policies;

Posters that can remind workers of the need to maintain social distance, wash and sterilise hands, cover coughs and clean common surfaces.

CONSIDERATION OF EMPLOYEE RIGHTS

The coronavirus outbreak also brings up a number of issues related to employee rights.

PAY

If you have employees who have coronavirus, they should not come to work, Your sick leave policy will apply but you may consider making it broader or more generous during the coronavirus outbreak.

The fear of not being paid could incentivize employees to come to work when sick. This exposes their coworkers and possibly the public. Allowing employees to take paid sick leave could be less expensive or disruptive in the long run.

CONSIDER STATE LAWS

The Federal laws may be one area of concern. Many states have laws that provide for leave and some provide for paid leave. You will need to take stock of what states your employees are in and how state leave laws apply.

YOU CAN FOLLOW ICMR RECOMMENDATIONS

You may keep yourself abreast of the guidelines provided by Indian Council for Medical Research (ICMR). It is advisable that during the pandemic. Employers should rely on the latest guidelines of ICMR and local public health assessments.

CONFIDENTIALITY

All information about employees obtained through medical examinations must be kept confidential. Avoid sharing an employee's medical information with co-workers.

Information regarding the medical condition or history of an employee must be collected and maintained on separate form and in separate medical files and be treated as a confidential medical record.

DOCTOR'S NOTES

You may require employees who have been away from the workplace during a pandemic to provide a doctor's note certifying fitness to return to work.

It is recommended that employer's not request them, however as health care providers may be too busy to provide them. Therefore, new approaches may be necessary such as reliance on local clinics to provide a form ,a stamp or an email to certify that an individual does not have the virus.

OTHER DISCRIMINATION RISKS

You should also refrain from making determinations based on other protected classes such as race, religion or national origin.

SUPPORT FOR BUSINESS OPERATIONS

The coronavirus outbreak will mean a change to business as usual. Have a contingency plans in place to address how work will get done ,how you will minimize the adverse impact on your customers, and how your workplace will adapt in order to minimize the spread of the disease. Detailed planning will limit the impact on your business operations.

Decide how you will address these issues:

SOCIAL DISTANCING Public health official may recommend increasing the physical distance between employees. To support this, consider offering:

- The option for employees to work from home, even if a family member is sick
- Staggered shifts

In addition, you may need to:

- Modify, postpone or cancel large work events
- Cancel non-essential travel

ABSENTEEISM: Consider how business operations can be maintained if there is increasing absenteeism. Identify essential jobs, roles and responsibilities and job functions. Look for additional resources, such as cross-trained employees who can critical positions. Consider shifting work to locations that are experiencing less of an impact or lower absenteeism rates.

SUPPLY CHAIN AND PRODUCTION DISRUPTIONS

Have alternative plans in place for raw materials, supplies and logistics and be prepared to be flexible as the situation changes.

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