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

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.

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 virus 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 to at least 1.5 metres apart. 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 at least 1.5 metres 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 hands with soap and water for at least 20 seconds, or sanitise hands with alcohol-based hand sanitiser before and after travelling on public transport, and
>> maintain physical 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 1.5 metre guide between clients queuing for service and using physical barriers where possible, and
> encouraging workers to physically distance themselves in break rooms and when using lifts.

If physical distancing measures introduce new health and safety risks (e.g. because they impact communication), you need to manage those risks too.

Nominate responsible persons to make sure your workers are following the rules for physical distancing.

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 (e.g. workplace entrances).

Health checks and quarantine

Monitor your workers for key symptoms of COVID-19, such as fever.

> Direct all workers (whether they are at the workplace or not) to report to you if:
>> they are experiencing any symptoms
>> they have been, or have potentially been, exposed to a person who has been diagnosed with COVID-19 or is suspected to have COVID-19 (even if the person who is suspected to have COVID-19 has not yet been tested), or
>> they have undertaken, or are planning to undertake, any travel
> Encourage workers to report if they observe another worker is displaying any symptoms.
> Stop workers working if they are displaying symptoms.
> Stop workers who have contracted COVID-19 from returning to the workplace until they provide evidence they are clear of the virus.

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:

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> they provide surface wipes to clean and disinfect workstations, and workstation equipment such as monitors, phones, keyboards and mouses
> worker's personal items used in the workplace such glasses and phones are cleaned and disinfected (e.g. using isopropyl alcohol wipes)
> that frequently touched surfaces such as doors, handrails, windows and vending machines are cleaned and disinfected frequently using appropriate detergent and disinfectant solutions;
> that people cleaning the workplace wear gloves and use alcohol-based hand sanitiser before and after wearing gloves; and
> they make hand sanitiser available at entry and exit points so workers can use it when arriving and leaving

To minimise the risk of exposure to the COVID-19 virus, people cleaning and disinfecting should wear gloves and use alcohol-based hand sanitiser before and after wearing gloves.

The workplace should provide closed bins for workers to hygienically dispose of waste and rubbish such as used tissues, immediately after use. Alcohol-based hand sanitiser should be available for workers to use after they dispose of their waste.

Workplaces should consider reducing the number of touch points for workers. For example, leaving access doors open, where appropriate.

Workplaces should consider limiting or reducing recirculated air-conditioning in common areas.

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:

> covering coughs and sneezes with an elbow or a tissue
> immediately disposing of tissues properly
> washing hands often for at least 20 seconds with soap and water, including before and after eating and after going to the toilet
> using alcohol-based hand sanitisers with at least 60% ethanol or 70% isopropanol as the active ingredient
> cleaning and disinfecting surfaces and shared equipment after use
> washing body hair and clothes thoroughly every day
> staying more than 1.5 metres away from others, and
> reporting and staying home if experiencing any symptoms.

In addition, to prevent the spread of the COVID-19 virus, workers should also:

> avoid touching their face
> avoid handshakes or any other close physical contact and
> put cigarette butts in the bin.

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 alcohol-based 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.
> Physical 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).

Keep workers informed

You should provide all workers information about the risks of exposure to the COVID-19 virus. Where required, workers should be trained in infection control.

The Australian Government Department of Health has a range of posters and other resources aimed at educating the public about COVID-19.

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.

What else can I do?

> 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 premises are 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 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 and resources

SWA materials

> Model Code of Practice: *Managing the work environment and facilities*
> Model Code of Practice: How to manage work health and safety risks
> For general advice for employers on managing risks to exposure to the COVID-19 virus, go to COVID-19 Information for workplaces

Support resources

swa.gov.au/coronavirus

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> [Business.gov.au – Support for businesses](#)
> [Fair Work Ombudsman – Coronavirus and Australian workplace laws](#)
> [Australian Government Treasury – Support for Businesses](#)
> [Australian Tax Office – COVID-19](#)
> Australian Government Coronavirus app ([Apple App Store](#), [Google Play](#))
> [World Health Organisation – Advice for workplaces](#)

Support services

> [Heads Up – Healthy workplaces support](#)
> [Australian Small Business and Family Enterprise Ombudsman](#)
> [www.lifeline.org.au](#)

*Please note. To ensure this webpage is accessible and easy to understand, it talks about employer responsibilities. Under the model WHS laws, duties apply to a broader range of people than just employers. Any person conducting a business or undertaking (PCBU) is covered by the model WHS laws.

For more information see the [Interpretive Guideline – model Work Health and Safety Act – the meaning of 'person conducting a business or undertaking'.](#)