COVID-19: Getting your workplace ready

On 11 March 2020 the World Health Organization (WHO) declared the outbreak of COVID-19 as a pandemic. South Africa recently joined over 100 countries in reporting cases of COVID-19. There is now consensus that the world will probably not be able to contain the virus, but that we should strive to slow the spread of the virus in order for health systems to cope with the number of patients.

The outbreak in China shows that quarantine, social distancing, and isolation of infected populations can contain the epidemic. This impact of the COVID-19 response in China is encouraging for the many countries where COVID-19 is beginning to spread. Singapore and Hong Kong, both of which had severe acute respiratory syndrome (SARS) epidemics in 2002–03, provide hope and many lessons to other countries. In both places, COVID-19 has been managed well to date, despite early cases, by early government action and through social distancing measures taken by individuals.

The purpose of this document is to advise members and staff on recommended actions to be taken in an attempt to slow the spread of the virus. The coronavirus could have a devastating impact on citizens as well as the economy and requires an urgent and organised response, not only from the health sector, but from the whole of government acting together with labour, business and community.

What is COVID-19?
COVID-19 is a new strain of the coronavirus that was first identified in Wuhan City, Hubei Province in China at the end of December 2019. The virus has spread throughout China and other countries, with China, South Korea, Italy and Iran being amongst the most impacted countries. It is encouraging to note that reported cases in China, the epicenter of the global health emergency, have declined sharply in the past two weeks, indicating that containment measures, if successfully executed, are effective

What are the symptoms?
Symptoms are like those of seasonal flu, including fever, shortness of breath and a characteristic dry cough. Should employees present with suspected symptoms, it is advised that they seek immediate medical and cease working from your center, and only return to the workplace if medically advised to do so.

How is the virus transmitted?
COVID-19 is a contagious virus and spreads at 1.5 to 2 times the rate of seasonal flu. It is spread through:
- The air by coughing and sneezing. Droplets fall on nearby surfaces and objects – such as desks, tables or telephones. Most of these droplets fall on nearby surfaces and objects – such as desks, tables or telephones. People could catch COVID-19 by touching contaminated surfaces or objects – and then touching their eyes, nose or mouth, before washing or sanitizing their hands.
- Close personal contact such as shaking hands. If they are standing within one meter of a person with COVID-19 they can catch it by breathing in droplets coughed out or exhaled by them.

When someone who has COVID-19 coughs or exhales they release droplets of infected fluid. Most of these droplets fall on nearby surfaces and objects - such as desks, tables or telephones. People could catch 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 catch it by breathing in droplets coughed out or exhaled by them. In other words, COVID-19 spreads in a similar way to flu

How dangerous is the virus?
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. Risk of serious illness rises with age: people over 40 seem to be more vulnerable than those under 40. People with weakened immune systems and people with underlying conditions such as diabetes, heart and lung disease are more vulnerable to develop secondary infections and other complications. The best approach is for companies and their employees to follow the basic measures to avoid contracting the virus. Containment is the best way of dealing with this public health crisis. This will also contribute to enabling an earlier economic recovery.

How to minimise the infection risk?
- Wash your hands frequently with and alcohol-based hand sanitizer or soap.
- Avoid close contact with anyone who is coughing or sneezing. Cover your nose and mouth with a tissue or elbow when you sneeze or cough.
- Avoid handshakes.
- Ensure surfaces are kept clean.
- Follow various travel guidance notices. South Africa has not yet instituted any travel bans or restriction of foreigners to the, but travel to high-risk countries such as China and Italy is not recommended.

The WHO recommends the following ways to prevent the spread of COVID-19 in your workplace

Employers should start doing these things now, even if COVID-19 has not arrived in the communities where they operate. They can already reduce working days lost due to illness and stop or slow the spread of COVID-19 if it arrives at one of your workplaces.

Make sure your workplaces are clean and hygienic
- Surfaces (e.g. desks and tables) and objects (e.g. telephones, keyboards) need to be wiped with disinfectant regularly, because contamination on surfaces touched by employees and customers is one of the main ways that COVID-19 spreads.

Promote regular and thorough hand-washing by employees, contractors and customers
- Put sanitizing hand rub dispensers in prominent places around the workplace. Make sure these dispensers are regularly refilled.
- Display posters promoting hand-washing.
- Make sure that staff, contractors and customers have access to places where they can wash their hands with soap and water.

Promote good respiratory hygiene in the workplace
- Display posters promoting respiratory hygiene.
- Ensure that face masks and / or paper tissues are available at your workplaces, for those who develop a runny nose or cough at work, along with closed bins for hygienically disposing of them.

Advise employees and contractors to consult national travel advice before going on business trips.

Keep communicating and promoting the message that people need to stay at home even if they have just mild symptoms.

How to manage COVID-19 risk when organising meetings

BEFORE the meeting:
- Consider whether a face-to-face meeting or event is needed. Could it be replaced by a teleconference or online event?
- Could the meeting be scaled down so that fewer people attend?
- Inform participants about no hand-shaking protocol.

DURING the meeting:
- Provide hand sanitizer and tissues at the venue.
- If there is space, arrange seats so that participants are at least one meter apart.
- Open windows and doors whenever possible to make sure the venue is well ventilated.

AFTER the meeting:
- Retain the names and contact details of all participants for at least a month.
- If someone at the meeting was isolated as a suspected COVID-19 case, the organiser should inform all participants.

More information:

The Coronavirus Outbreak 24-hour Hotline Number is 0800 029 999.

The National Department of Health has made available very useful material, specifically developed for the workplace, which companies can use to put up and distribute: http://www.health.gov.za/index.php/component/phocadownload/category/599-corona-virus-outbreak

Find the latest information from WHO on where Covid-19 is spreading: https://www.who.int/emergencies/diseases/novel-coronavirus-2019/situation-reports/

Advice and guidance from WHO on Covid-19 https://www.who.int/emergencies/diseases/novel-coronavirus-2019 https://www.epi-win.com/