

Coronavirus

Responsibilities of employers.



As the threat of Coronavirus gets closer to home, you might be wondering what you, as an employer can be doing and what your responsibilities are. We answer some of the important questions that are being asked.

What do I need to be doing as an employer?

At this stage, your first steps should be to carry out a risk assessment and determine the likelihood of your employees contracting the virus whilst at work. Also make sure that if employees have a query in relation to Coronavirus and their employment, they know who to contact.

What precautionary measures can we take?

Reassure your employees by letting them know the precautionary measures that you're taking. Measures might include:

Ensuring access to hand sanitisers.

Washing hands thoroughly with soap and water.

Cleaning offices and workspaces thoroughly and on a daily basis.

Using tissues when coughing and sneezing and disposing of them immediately.

Consider a ban on shaking hands or cheek kissing if you suspect viruses are circulating

Rather than sending employees to affected areas on business travel, use video- conferencing instead.

Make sure that your emergency contact details list is up-to-date.

One of my employees has just returned from China. What should I do?

With regards to employees who have recently travelled to or have been in contact with someone who has travelled to China, issue a clear guide with information on how they should proceed.

Check the latest information on the government website: <https://www.gov.uk/guidance/wuhan-novel-coronavirus-information-for-the-public#advice-for-travellers>.

You should also have in place an infectious diseases contingency plan for business continuity purposes. This is basically a plan of what you will do should the virus have an impact on your business.

If my employee has symptoms associated with Coronavirus or has been in contact with someone who is infected can I instruct them not to come to work?

Employers have a duty to ensure the health and safety of all their employees which includes providing a safe place of work. Equally, employees must take reasonable care to ensure they don't endanger themselves or any other person who might be affected by their acts at work. The virus, if spread around the workplace could have serious implications especially if an employee at high risk of becoming severely ill contracts it. It would therefore be justified if you instructed an employee with

the symptoms of the coronavirus not to attend work until they have been seen by a medical professional and their symptoms have cleared.

What if an employee is refusing to come to work because they are worried about Coronavirus?

Your response in this situation will be on a case-by-case basis. You should listen to concerns that the employee may have and, if these prove genuine, you should try to resolve them to protect the health and safety of the member of staff. Home working may be an option.

However, if the employee's refusal to attend work is unreasonable it could result in disciplinary action.

Will I have to close my workplace?

There is no requirement for employers to close their workplace during an infectious disease breakout and previous guidance given by the department of health mainly focused on general hygiene measures to reduce risk of transmission. You should put together a plan that, where possible, allows staff to continue working at home or at a different location if you must close your workplace.

What if I do need to close the workplace?

This is why you need a contingency plan. It may be that staff can work from home in order to minimise the impact on the business. You also need to establish a system for communication.

Do I need to put in place special measures to protect employees who are at risk if exposed to the virus?

Those with weakened immune systems, for example, the elderly and individuals with long term conditions such as cancer, lung disease, heart disease and diabetes seem to be more vulnerable to becoming severely ill if they are infected with the COVID-19. Employers have a duty to protect their employee's health and safety and therefore should take measures to protect their employees who are most at risk. For example, you might feel it necessary to move an at-risk member of staff to a different work site or location as a precautionary measure.

Pregnant employees and employees who have a condition that constitutes as a disability are protected by the law and you are required to make adjustments in order to protect them. Asthmatic employees are considered to be vulnerable to the virus and they may be protected by the Equality Act 2010 if their condition satisfies the definition of a "disability". Special measures that might be used to protect them include assigning them to a different workplace or allowing them to work from home. You must also carry out a risk assessment for any employees who are pregnant. Pregnant employees must not work in conditions that might pose a risk to a new or expectant mother or their baby. If the risk is unavoidable changes should be made to the employee's working conditions or hours and failing that, they should be removed to another job or suspended on full pay. Suitable alternative work must be offered to the employee, if available, before suspending them on maternity grounds.

If you have further queries regarding Coronavirus in general, there are a number of useful sites :

<https://www.who.int/health-topics/coronavirus>

<https://www.gov.uk/government/organisations/department-of-health-and-social-care>

<https://www.nhs.uk/conditions/coronavirus-covid-19/>