

CORONA VIRUS – COVID - 19

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Irish Government Advice for Employers

The Irish Government has advised employers that there is no need for employees without symptoms of infection with COVID-19 to stay off work or to remain separate from other people. The Irish state are on RED light and in state of emergency to contain spread of the virus.

Food business owners should ensure that staff are aware of the COVID-19 (Coronavirus) situation and the advice being given by the HSE.

However, food business owners (FBOs) should remember that they have particular responsibilities under food law and must maintain proper hygiene practices at all times.

They should, in general:

- ensure that staff are trained appropriately in food hygiene
- ensure effective supervision of staff to reinforce hygienic practices
- provide the correct facilities e.g. hand washing, toilets, to enable staff to practice good hygiene
- ensure staff and contractors report any physical signs/symptoms, before commencing work or while in the workplace.
- keep vigilant and ensure that staff are not ill and are fit to work

Information about COVID-19 virus

A coronavirus is a type of virus. As a group, coronaviruses are common across the world. COVID-19 is a new strain of coronavirus first identified in Wuhan City, China in January 2020.

The incubation period of COVID-19 is between 2 to 14 days. This means that if a person remains well 14 days after contact with someone with confirmed coronavirus, they have not been infected.

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How do I avoid catching or spreading COVID-19?

- Wash your hands regularly - with soap and water and for at least 20 seconds. Ensure you use an anti-bacterial soap and alcohol based hand sanitiser. Two stage hand clean is essential.
- Wash your hands when you get home or into work
- Use alcohol based hand sanitisers if you do not have access to soap and water
- Cover your mouth and nose with a tissue or with your sleeve - not your hands - when you cough or sneeze
- Used tissues should be put in the bin immediately and your hands should be washed afterwards
- Try to avoid contact with people who are unwell
- Do not touch your eyes, nose or mouth if your hands are not clean

Signs and symptoms of COVID-19

The following symptoms may develop in the 14 days after exposure to someone who has COVID-19 infection:

- cough
- difficulty in breathing
- fever

Generally, these infections can cause more severe symptoms in people with weakened immune systems, older people, and those with long-term conditions like diabetes, cancer and chronic lung disease.

How COVID-19 is spread

From what we know about other coronaviruses, spread of COVID-19 is most likely to happen when there is close contact (within 2 metres or less) with an infected person. It is likely that the risk increases the longer someone has close contact with an infected person.

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Respiratory secretions produced when an infected person coughs or sneezes containing the virus are most likely to be the main means of transmission.

There are 2 main routes by which people can spread COVID-19:

- infection can be spread to people who are nearby (within 2 metres) or possibly could be inhaled into the lungs.
- it is also possible that someone may become infected by touching a surface, object or the hand of an infected person that has been contaminated with respiratory secretions and then touching their own mouth, nose, or eyes (such as touching door knob or shaking hands then touching own face)

There is currently little evidence that people who are without symptoms are infectious to others.

Preventing spread of infection

There is currently no vaccine to prevent COVID-19. The best way to prevent infection is to avoid being exposed to the virus.

HSE recommends that the following general cold and flu precautions are taken to help prevent people from catching and spreading COVID-19:

- cover your mouth and nose with a tissue or your sleeve (not your hands) when you cough or sneeze. See [Catch it, Bin it, Kill it](#)
- put used tissues in the bin straight away
- wash your hands with anti bacterial soap and water often – use alcohol based hand sanitiser gel if soap and water are not available.
- try to avoid close contact with people who are unwell
- clean and disinfect frequently touched objects and surfaces
- do not touch your eyes, nose or mouth if your hands are not clean

If you are worried about symptoms, please call HSE 112/999. Do not go directly to your GP or other healthcare environment.

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How long the virus can survive

How long any respiratory virus survives will depend on a number of factors, for example:

- what surface the virus is on
- whether it is exposed to sunlight
- differences in temperature and humidity
- exposure to cleaning products

Under most circumstances, the amount of infectious virus on any contaminated surfaces is likely to have decreased significantly by 72 hours.

We know that similar viruses are transferred to and by people's hands. Therefore, regular hand hygiene and cleaning of frequently touched surfaces will help to reduce the risk of infection.

What to do if an employee or a member of the public becomes unwell and believe they have been exposed to COVID-19

If the person has not been to specified areas in the last 14 days, then normal practice should continue.

If someone becomes unwell in the workplace and has travelled to China or other affected countries, the unwell person should be removed to an area which is at least 2 metres away from other people. If possible find a room or area where they can be isolated behind a closed door, such as a staff office. If it is possible to open a window, do so for ventilation.

The individual who is unwell should call HSE 112 from their mobile, or 999 if an emergency (if they are seriously ill or injured or their life is at risk) and explain which country they have returned from in the last 14 days and outline their current symptoms.

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Whilst they wait for advice from HSE 112/999 or an ambulance to arrive, they should remain at least 2 metres from other people. They should avoid touching people, surfaces and objects and be advised to cover their mouth and nose with a disposable tissue when they cough or sneeze and put the tissue in a bag or pocket then throw the tissue in the bin. If they don't have any tissues available, they should cough and sneeze into the crook of their elbow.

If they need to go to the bathroom whilst waiting for medical assistance, they should use a separate bathroom if available.

Returning from travel overseas to affected areas

People who have returned from Hubei Province, including Wuhan, Iran, Daegu or Cheongdo in the Republic of Korea, and any area within Italy under containment measures in the last 14 days should avoid attending work. They should call HSE 112/999 for advice and stay at home.

All other staff should continue to attend work

What to do if a member of staff or the public with suspected COVID-19 has recently been in your workplace

For contacts of a suspected case in the workplace, no restrictions or special control measures are required while laboratory test results for COVID19 are awaited. In particular, there is no need to close the workplace or send other staff home at this point. Most possible cases turn out to be negative. Therefore, until the outcome of test results is known there is no action that the workplace needs to take.

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What to do if a member of staff or the public with confirmed COVID-19 has recently been in your workplace

Closure of the workplace is not recommended.

The management team of the office or workplace will be contacted by the HSE local Health Protection Team to discuss the case, identify people who have been in contact with them and advise on any actions or precautions that should be taken.

A risk assessment of each setting will be undertaken by the Health Protection Team with the lead responsible person. Advice on the management of staff and members of the public will be based on this assessment.

The Health Protection Team will also be in contact with the case directly to advise on isolation and identifying other contacts and will be in touch with any contacts of the case to provide them with appropriate advice.

Certifying absence from work

By law, medical evidence is not required for the first 7 days of sickness. After 7 days, it is for the employer to determine what evidence they require, if any, from the employee. This does not need to be fit note (Med 3 form) issued by a GP or other doctor.

Your employee will be advised to isolate themselves and not to work in contact with other people by HSE112/999 if they are a carrier of, or have been in contact with, an infectious or contagious disease, such as COVID-19.

We strongly suggest that employers use their discretion around the need for medical evidence for a period of absence where an employee is advised to stay at home due to suspected COVID-19, in accordance with the public health advice being issued by the government.

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Advice for staff returning from travel anywhere else in the world within the last 14 days

Currently, there are minimal cases outside the listed areas and therefore the likelihood of an individual coming into contact with a confirmed case is extremely low.

These staff can continue to attend work unless they have been informed that they have had contact with a confirmed case of COVID-19

If individuals are aware that they have had close contact with a confirmed case of COVID-19 they should contact HSE 112/999 for further advice.

Cleaning offices and public spaces where there are suspected or confirmed cases of COVID-19

Coronavirus symptoms are similar to a flu-like illness and include cough, fever, or shortness of breath. Once symptomatic, all surfaces that the person has come into contact with must be cleaned including:

- all surfaces and objects which are visibly contaminated with body fluids
- all potentially contaminated high-contact areas such as toilets, door handles, telephones, hand wash sinks, towel holders, soap and sanitiser dispensers, card machines, till areas, computers and keyboards

Public areas where a symptomatic individual has passed through and spent minimal time in (such as corridors) but which are not visibly contaminated with body fluids do not need to be specially cleaned and disinfected.

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If a person becomes ill in a shared space, these should be cleaned using disposable cloths and household detergents, according to current recommended workplace legislation and practice.

Can the virus be passed on through food?

Experience with SARS and MERS suggest that people are not infected with the virus through food. So, it is unlikely the virus is passed on through food and there is no evidence yet of this happening with COVID-19 (coronavirus).

Coronaviruses need a host (animal or human) to grow in and cannot grow in food. Thorough cooking is expected to kill the virus because we know that a heat treatment of at least 30min at 60°C is effective with SARS.

When should hands be washed?

Food workers must wash hands:

- before starting work
- before handling cooked or ready-to-eat food
- after handling or preparing raw food
- after handling waste
- after cleaning duties
- after using the toilet
- after blowing nose, sneezing or coughing
- after eating drinking or smoking
- after handling money

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What is the proper hand washing technique?

Hands should be washed for at least 20 seconds as follows:

- Wet hands under warm running water
- Use enough soap to form a good lather
- Rub all parts of hands with soap and water
- Lather for at least 20 seconds, vigorously and thoroughly rubbing all hand surfaces, including the fingertips and thumbs
- Rinse hands thoroughly with running water
- Dry hands thoroughly

What should food business owners/managers do if they have a supply chain problem caused by COVID-19?

Infections of staff with COVID-19 (coronavirus) in food businesses around the world may lead to disruption of the food supply chain where certain ingredients and packaging may be in short supply.

Food businesses may be considering some of the following:

- leaving out or substituting ingredients in a product, and/or
- changing their packaging, and/or
- changing their process

In these situations, It is important that food businesses remember their legal obligations to only place safe food on the market.

Any change to product, packaging or processing requires a full review of the business' food safety management system (GHP and HACCP).

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This will allow them to:

- risk assess any food safety issues that could result from the proposed changes
- put in place controls to manage any risks identified
- document the changes

Examples of issues to consider include:

- The introduction of allergens when changing ingredients and/or ingredient suppliers
- Safe shelf-life if packaging changes and/or the product is formulated differently
- The introduction of new microbiological, physical, chemical hazards with new ingredients

There may be other issues depending on the type of business/product involved.

Rubbish disposal, including tissues

All waste that has been in contact with the individual, including used tissues, and masks if used, should be put in a plastic rubbish bag and tied when full. The plastic bag should then be placed in a second bin bag and tied. It should be put in a safe place and marked for storage until the result is available. If the individual tests negative, this can be put in the normal waste.

Should the individual test positive, you will be instructed what to do with the waste.