

# Coronavirus options for employers

The Coronavirus (SARS-CoV2), that first crossed over to humans in Wuhan, China, has now sickened more than 100,000 people worldwide. The condition the virus creates, COVID-19, has killed more than 4,000. Outbreaks so far in the U.S. have been scattered and most deadly to the elderly and those with underlying health conditions. Many localized outbreaks have been traced to overseas travel, but some community-acquired cases have defied easy explanation. Predicting the outbreak's course by public health officials and employers has so far proven difficult.

The Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) have recommended a flexible response to the Coronavirus based on local conditions. However, the situation is changing rapidly, and employers must have plans and policies in place to react quickly. The guidance touches on issues such as handling sick employees, telecommuting and managing business travel.

## **Keep sick employees at home**

The CDC advises employers to keep sick employees at home. For the Coronavirus, initial and common symptoms are a cough and fever greater than 100.4°F. Employees with symptoms should not come in contact with co-workers. They should be screened for possible testing. If the test is positive, they shouldn't return to work until they have been symptom free for 24-hours without medication. Employees who develop symptoms at work should be separated from co-workers and sent home immediately. Note that some infected workers may develop pneumonia and become seriously ill. They may require extensive treatment and may even die.

Employer leave policies should be flexible enough to allow employees to comply with public health recommendations. Employers must assure sick employees they will not be penalized for missing work when they become infected. The same applies if they are needed to care for an ill family member. As a practical matter, if workers are out of leave, you should not penalize them for missing work if infected. Doing so could spur further workplace infection – a costly proposition.

If your company uses temporary workers, tell the referring agency not to send sick workers. Make sure the temp agency knows your policy on staying home when ill.

If you normally require a medical provider's note, the CDC recommends temporarily waiving that requirement. Medical providers are likely to be very busy and obtaining notes may be impossible.

## **Workplace Posters**

The CDC also advises employers to place posters in the workplace advising workers to go or stay home if they are sick. Posters on coughing and sneezing etiquette are also recommended. Hand hygiene posters along with well-placed bottles of hand sanitizer will help slow the spread of disease as well.

Employees should wash their hands for at least 20 seconds. Hand sanitizer should contain between 60 and 95% alcohol. Touched surfaces such as countertops, keyboards and doorknobs should be washed regularly. Disposable wipes should be available for employees to use on contaminated surfaces.

## Travel

When planning international travel for employees, consult the [CDC's Traveler's Health Notices](#) to obtain recent updates. Employees should not travel if they have had acute respiratory illness symptoms within two weeks. Symptoms include fever, cough or shortness of breath. These symptoms can occur anywhere from 2-14 days after exposure.

Employees who fall ill while traveling or on temporary duty should notify their supervisor and promptly obtain medical attention. U.S. Citizens traveling outside the U.S. can contact American Embassies or consulates for a list of in-country healthcare providers.

Because travel to Coronavirus hot spots can lead to infection, employers may want to ask workers about recent travel. That's true even if the worker traveled for personal reasons. Follow the most recent guidance on isolation post-return. In many cases, the CDC recommends self-isolation for the incubation period. You can compel workers to stay home without violating the Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA).

## Employee responsibility

Employees who are caring for an ill family member should notify their supervisor. They should also perform a [self-assessment per the CDC guidelines](#). Specifically, they should seek medical attention for any fever, cough, or shortness of breath and self-isolate until symptoms have cleared.

## Planning

CDC guidance focuses on four areas:

1. Reducing transmission among staff;
2. Protecting people who are at higher risk for adverse health complications;
3. Maintaining business operations; and
4. Minimizing adverse effects on other entities in their supply chains.

Older adults and people with underlying health conditions are more likely have a severe reaction to the virus. Those with specific pre-existing conditions are at greatest risk. According to preliminary data from the World Health Organization (WHO), those with cardiovascular disease face a 13% mortality rate if infected. Diabetics face similar higher mortality risks. As you plan your response and consider options like telework, you may want to give priority to high risk workers. But make it voluntary. You don't want to trigger allegations you're discriminating based on age or disability.

The CDC guidance recommends cross-training employees to perform essential services. Identifying which positions are suitable for telecommuting allows employers to keep workflow moving while reducing the chance of infection.

Supply chains may be interrupted as well. Employers should identify alternative supply sources as a backup. If necessary, be prepared to prioritize customers. In extremely serious conditions, be prepared to cease operations until the infection has run its course. While this may have short-term consequences, in the long-term, the move may mean survival rather than bankruptcy.

Employees should know what pay and benefits will be available to them should work arrangements change. In response to the Coronavirus outbreak, a few states and cities have introduced or passed extended or paid leave plans. Double-check your state for new legislation.

## Other CDC recommendations and resources

CDC guidance lists these other recommendations and resources for employers to use when developing their plan to cope with this crisis or the next.

- Identify possible work-related exposure and health risks to your employees. The U.S. Department of Labor's Occupational Safety and Health Administration has more information on how to [protect workers from potential exposures](#) to COVID-19.
- Review HR policies to make sure that policies and practices are consistent with public health recommendations. They must also comply with existing state and federal workplace laws (see the [Department of Labor's](#) and the [Equal Employment Opportunity Commission's](#) websites).
- Explore whether you can establish policies and practices, such as flexible worksites (e.g., telecommuting) and flexible work hours (e.g., staggered shifts), to increase the physical distance among employees and between employees and others. State and local health authorities may recommend the use of social distancing strategies such as quarantines. For employees who can telework, encourage employees to telework instead of coming into the workplace until symptoms are completely resolved. Ensure that you have the information technology and infrastructure needed to support multiple employees working from home.
- Identify essential business functions, essential jobs or roles, and critical elements within your supply chains required to maintain business operations. Plan for how your business will operate if there is increasing absenteeism or these supply chains are interrupted.
- Set up authorities, triggers, and procedures for activating and terminating the company's infectious disease outbreak response plan. Work closely with your local health officials and the CDC to identify these triggers.
- Plan to minimize exposure between employees and between employees and the public if public health officials call for social distancing.
- Anticipate employee fear, anxiety, rumors, and misinformation, and plan communications accordingly. Keep them updated on the latest guidance.
- In some communities, early childhood programs and K-12 schools may temporarily close if COVID-19 worsens. Determine how you will operate if absenteeism spikes from increases in sick employees. Have plans to manage those who stay home to care for sick family members or who are quarantined with them. Should schools close, develop contingencies to allow working parents to balance work and childcare through flexible workplace and leave policies.
- Local public health officials have or will develop community-wide strategies. Get on their information distribution lists.
- Cancel non-essential business travel to affected countries per [travel guidance](#) on the CDC website. Be aware that other countries may suddenly limit movement in and out of their borders. It may then become impossible to return home if the stranded employees become ill.
- Consider cancelling large meetings that bring together workers from Coronavirus hot spots. Instead, use technology-based meetings, webinars and the like.

### **Other possible government help**

The Trump Administration has announced plans for payroll tax cuts and paid leave to assist workers who lose time during the Coronavirus epidemic. Congress will have to approve any such aid. Stay alert to legislative action at all levels, including your state and city. This is a fluid situation and changes are happening every day.