

Coronavirus (COVID-19): Physical distancing

COVID-19 is a health and safety risk. Employers have obligations to ensure the health and safety of workers and others. They must have a plan on what will be done to protect and support workers, and health and safety representatives (HSRs) must be consulted on this plan.

There are several factors that make protecting workers from contracting coronavirus and being exposed to SARS-CoV-2, difficult:

- Currently there is no vaccine available, so elimination of the hazard is not possible
- In 50% of cases the virus is transmitted from infected people who have no symptoms i.e. they don't know they are infected
- There is no specific treatment that kills the virus once it is replicating in our bodies
- Whilst many workers will experience mild symptoms, some workers, including more vulnerable workers (such as older workers and workers with pre-existing health issues) may experience more severe symptoms
- A significant number of people become very ill and COVID-19 can be fatal.

Given these factors we need to take a high level of precaution, as people's lives depend on it – an essential precaution is physical distancing.

Employers/PCBUs are legally required to consult with workers and their HSRs when identifying hazards at work and applying and reviewing control measures. Improving methods to prevent the spread of coronavirus will be much more effective when workers and their HSRs are asked for input and those ideas are considered.

The best way to prevent harm

As with any other risk, employers/PCBUs must consider how to implement the most reliable ways to prevent harm. This should involve the application of the hierarchy of controls (diagram below), which requires priority to be placed on the elimination of hazards, or isolation of people from exposure to harm where possible, with lower order administrative controls which focus on individual worker behaviours or the application of PPE, only applied where higher order controls are not possible.

Applying the hierarchy of controls to COVID-19 may require multiple measures to be implemented in a workplace.

Elimination and substitution – are currently not feasible as there is no vaccine for coronavirus.

Isolation – this is where the hazard and workers are isolated from each other. In the case of SARS-COV-2 this is keeping our distance - physical distancing - in time and space. The intent of physical distancing is to limit person to person contact – 1.5 metres between people and if indoors, one person per 4 square metres.

Working remotely - this may be working from home or working at a different location where there are fewer people and it is easier to implement the distance of 1.5 metres between people. These options are likely to require the lengthening of time to carry out tasks, e.g. reducing the number of people working on any one task at a time. This will require a clear consideration of increased workload or work intensification.

Physical distancing will not be practicable for many workers, e.g. frontline workers caring or working with people or where task or safety requirements require more than one-person, e.g. equipment operation, confined space entry, working at heights etc. In most of these circumstances, control measures will rely on infection control measures through changing the way people work and the use of personal protective gear.

Paradoxically, some industries and workplaces will need to hire more workers to deal with increased workloads.

Working at a distance - if remote working or working from home is not practicable, the employer /PCBU must take measures to implement physical distancing (to 1.5 metres and, if indoors, 4 square metres per person). Here are some examples to assist when deciding what are the best measures for your work:

- Workstations moved or rearranged to keep people from being closer than 1.5 metres and in enclosed rooms with more than 1 person - every 4 square metres
- Small work teams and limits or restrictions on mixing between teams

- Perform tasks at different times when less people are around. This should be done by agreement with workers as changes to hours or locations could create other hazards, including psychosocial hazards
- Control handovers between shifts to minimise contact
- Divide and separate critical personnel and teams – via location, shift structures or onsite protocols
- Allocate work so that fewer workers are required to be in the one place at the same time
- Minimise and conduct work gatherings outside where people are not expected to be in close contact
- Change the flow or direction of people to decrease contact, e.g. ensure entrances and exits are separate, change how people move around the site
- Limit to one the number of people in vehicles or small spaces – without introducing other safety hazards
- Work at a slower pace so that less workers need to physically interact with each other
- Use technology to decrease contact between workers
- Change the timing and location of breaks to make sure 1.5 metres of separation is achievable. This should be done by agreement with workers. Workers must be given the appropriate breaks as per normal according to awards and enterprise agreements - it is very important not to increase fatigue and other hazards
- Provide room calculators to make it easier to follow the four-square metre rule

Limiting face to face contact is essential in preventing the spread of the virus. Physical distancing by itself will not be enough – a combination of controls is necessary.

Engineering controls:

- Physical barriers to separate people - Perspex barriers can be used to create a physical separation (of course, these will need to be cleaned very regularly)
- Use equipment which increases the distance between people or decreases the time that people must be close together – without introducing other safety hazards
- Improve air circulation – open windows, air-conditioning - increase outdoor intake

- Minimise close contact with colleagues, customers and clients including minimising cash transactions and the need to exchange paperwork and other materials.

Administrative controls:

- Improve and increase cleaning especially of shared areas, facilities like washrooms and meal areas, tools and equipment, all hard surfaces. This should include in between shifts or where new workers are entering an area
- Additional pop-up handwashing stations or facilities, providing soap, water and Health Department approved hand sanitiser in as many spots as possible
- All workers must be given the time and access to the facilities and equipment needed to protect themselves and others.

Personal protective equipment

Depending on the work this will include eye protection, respiratory protection, clothing, gloves etc. Protective equipment must not be shared between people and as much as possible not reused. The Health Department provides advice about workers who need PPE and for what tasks. It is important that PPE is not used unnecessarily as there is currently a global shortage and PPE stockpiles must be managed carefully.

If it is to be reused proper cleaning of PPE to the appropriate standard is essential.

If possible, don't wear work clothes home. Never shake out clothing before placing in the washing machine and use the hot/warm wash cycle. Employers should provide laundering facilities for workers to wash uniforms, especially where close contact with others has occurred in the workplace.

Training and information

For these controls employers/PCBUs have general obligations to train, supervise and provide workers with information to enable working in a healthy and safe manner to prevent the spread of coronavirus and protect everyone from COVID-19.

Workers and their HSRs must be consulted about all measures being taken and HSRs have the right to request a review of risk controls.

References

www.actu.org.au/coronavirus

Links to Government advice can be found here:

www.actu.org.au/coronavirus/medical-alerts

www.health.gov.au

www.safeworkaustralia.gov.au