COVID-19

Advice for Employers

Introduction

Coronavirus (or COVID-19) is an illness that can affect people's lungs and airways. This factsheet provides a guide to the steps employers should take to protect the health and safety of their employees and workers. It also sets out their responsibilities under employment law.

Good practice for employers

Employers should take the following steps to reduce the risk of exposure to coronavirus in the workplace:

- Make sure emergency contact details for all employees are correct and up to date.
- Make sure managers are aware of how to identify coronavirus symptoms and understand relevant company policies and procedures, such as those covering sick pay and health and safety.
- Keep all employees up to date about the steps being taken to minimise the risks of exposure in the workplace.
- Encourage employees to wash their hands regularly, and provide hand sanitiser, tissues and clean places to wash hands.
- Encourage employees to let their manager know as soon as possible if they will not be able to come into work due to coronavirus.
- Encourage remote working where possible.
- Review whether travel or meetings are necessary, or could be held remotely.

Time off and sick pay

Sick pay for employees advised to self-isolate

The Department for Work and Pensions has confirmed that any employee or worker who needs to self-isolate is entitled to receive Statutory Sick Pay from day one. Employees may need to self-isolate because they have been told to by a doctor, or they or someone in their household has coronavirus or coronavirus symptoms.

Employees should tell their employer the reason they are off sick and how long they expect to be absent. However, employees who have been told to self-isolate may not be able to get a sick note from their doctor and, as a result, employers may need to be flexible if they usually require evidence of sickness.

For more information about self-isolating, go to https://publichealthmatters.blog.gov.uk/2020/02/20/what-is-self-isolation-and-why-is-it-important/.

Employees who are told not to work

Employers can instruct employees and workers not to come to work even if they are not sick. For example, an employee who has recently returned from an affected area may be instructed not to come in. In these cases, employees are still entitled to receive their usual pay.

Taking time off to support dependants

Employees are entitled to time off work in order to help a dependant who is impacted by coronavirus unexpectedly or in an emergency. For example, employees are entitled to time off if their child or another dependant is required to go into isolation. It is important that the amount of time an employee takes off is reasonable.

While employers are not required to pay Statutory Sick Pay for this time off, some employers might choose to offer pay depending on contractual arrangements and workplace policies.

For more information about taking time off to support dependants, go to www.gov.uk/time-off-for-dependants.

School closures

Schools in England are closing and employees may need to make new childcare arrangements. If an employee needs emergency time off for childcare, they can take time off to support dependants, or agree to take the time off as holiday with their employer.

Employers should talk to their workforce as soon as possible about the impact and next steps, such as agreeing flexible working.

Social distancing and working from home

Working from home

The Government has advised everyone to practice social distancing and avoid unnecessary contact with people. Employees can support their workforce by offering more flexible ways of working, and allowing staff to work from home wherever possible.

Employers should take extra steps for anyone in their workforce who is at an increased risk from coronavirus, including those who:

- Have a long-term health condition
- Are pregnant
- Are aged 70 or over
- Care for someone with a health condition.

Employees who allow their employees to work from home should keep in regular contact, pay the employee as usual and check on their health and wellbeing.

Employees who choose to self-isolate

Some employees may decide they do not want to go to work in order to limit their exposure to coronavirus. It is important that employers listen to any concerns and take reasonable steps to respond to any genuine concerns. For example, an employer could offer flexible working or suggest that they work from home.

An employer might also decide to give the employee the option to take the time off as holiday or unpaid leave. However, any employee who refuses to attend work and cannot agree an alternative solution with their employer may face disciplinary action.

For more information about managing absences from work, go to www.acas.org.uk/absence-from-work.

Managing coronavirus in the workplace

If the workplace needs to close

The Government is advising everyone to try and stop unnecessary contact with people, and work from home where possible. It is important to have a plan in place to manage any workplace closures. The plan should:

- Make sure employees and workers are able to communicate with their employer.
- Support employees to work from home where appropriate, such as by asking those with work laptops to take them home, or arranging paper-based tasks for employees that do not have access to a computer. For more information about homeworking, go to https://archive.acas.org.uk/index.aspx?articleid=4853.

An employer might need to close down their business temporarily, or ask staff to reduce their contracted hours. Unless specified in their contract or otherwise agreed, employers will still be required to pay their employees during the closure. It is important to inform employees as soon as possible about any closure.

Taking holiday

Employers have the right to instruct employees and workers when to take holiday if they need to. For example, an employer might decide to close the business for a week and tell everyone to use their holiday entitlement.

It is important to communicate with employees and explain why they need to close. Employers will also need to give staff notice of the closure. For example, if a business wants to close for 5 days, they will need to tell workers at least 10 days before.

Coronavirus in the workplace

In the event that someone with coronavirus comes to work, the local Public Health England health protection team will get in contact with employers in England to discuss the case, carry out a risk assessment, and advise on any actions or precautions. For more information about health protection teams, go to www.gov.uk/guidance/contacts-phe-health-protection-teams.

Illness in the workplace

It is important that employers understand the actions they and their employees should take if someone becomes unwell in the workplace with coronavirus symptoms. Anyone who becomes unwell should:

- Tell their employer immediately and go home
- Avoid touching anything in the workplace
- Always cough and sneeze into a tissue
- Self-isolate for 7 days if they live alone, or 14 days if they live with others.

Further information

Acas: 'Coronavirus: advice for employers and employees'
www.acas.org.uk/coronavirus

NHS England: 'Coronavirus (COVID-19)'
www.nhs.uk/conditions/coronavirus-covid-19

Public Health England: 'What is self-isolation and why is it important?'
https://publichealthmatters.blog.gov.uk/2020/02/20/what-is-self-isolation-and-why-is-it-important/

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