

What is Coronavirus?

Coronavirus (COVID-19) is a respiratory illness caused by a new virus. Symptoms range from a mild cough to pneumonia. Some people recover easily, others may get very sick very quickly. There is evidence that it spreads from person to person. The incubation period of COVID-19 is between two and 14 days. Common signs of infection include a cough, difficulty in breathing and a fever. Good hygiene can prevent infection.

Find out more on the [World Health Organisation](#) website.

What can you do?

Make sure you remain up to date with the current advice from the [Australian Government Department of Human Services](#) (AGDofHS) information website.

The situation is changing constantly. There are basic, but effective, ways to help prevent the infection's spread including:

- Making sure your workplace is clean and hygienic.
- Promoting regular and thorough hand-washing by everyone.
- Providing all employees with disinfectant wipes or an alcohol-based hand sanitiser.
- Encouraging people to use and bin tissues.
- Encourage coughing into an elbow or shoulder and not hands.

In recent days the use of social distancing, self-isolation or quarantine are being encouraged.

Staff should not attend the workplace if they have any flu-like symptoms - they should see their doctor and get a clearance to attend work.

Recommendations for Australian employers

Build a contingency team: Identify a person, or small group of people, to take responsibility for operating the contingency plan and allocate clear responsibilities for its implementation

Develop a contingency plan: Every organisation will need to assess its own level of exposure to business disruption caused by the virus. If it has a site, conducts business or has supply chains in an affected country or region, there will be a direct impact to the company's day-to-day operations. The plan will need to take account of current and potential impacts and manage the specific business risks associated with the disruption, including service delivery and workforce issues. Communicate the plan to key teams and individuals across the business.

As the situation develops: Those responsible for the contingency plan should meet regularly to review the preparations and ensure they are still fit for purpose. It's important to act early, even if planned contingencies are not then needed.

Test capacity to work remotely: Your IT team should be determining the organisation's capacity to work remotely (and stress testing this), with staff being able to access all applications and systems required to operate the business.

International travel: If you have any staff who have been living or travelling abroad or who have had close contact with people returning from overseas - they should be implementing self-isolation for 14 days.

Leave provisions: There are currently no special leave provisions within the Fair Work Act - FWO's website states that full-time and part-time permanent workers who can't come to work because they are sick with COVID-19 can take paid sick leave, or if they need to look after a sick family member or housemate they can take paid carer's leave. They can also take unpaid carer's leave if they run out of paid sick or carer's leave.

See [Fair Work Australia](#) website for further information.

Annual leave and return to work process: Organisations should update their leave process to seek specific information from employees with authorised leave, or seeking leave, to include country destination(s) or any transit through a country. On return to work, employees who have actively, and intentionally, visited those areas identified by the AGDofHS as high risk should be required to self-isolate for 14 days. In addition, if they have been in contact with, or have symptoms of, COVID-19 they should not physically come to work but contact the workplace for an assessment of risk and identified strategies to manage an isolation period – i.e. work from home opportunities.

Staff intending to return to work following illness should have a medical certificate indicating they are fit for work. Make sure anybody's return to work process is a positive one – remembering they have been isolated from the workplace for some time and should be 'welcomed' back.

Consultation process: Organisations should follow all requirements for consultation in relation to major workplace change, including changes to rosters or hours of work, and termination of employment. Employers should check and adhere to the specific requirements described in the current awards, EBAs and other registered agreements applicable to their workforce, along with those in existing company employment contracts, policies and procedures.

Interim changes to employee conditions should be documented in writing and signed by both employer and employee as evidence of agreement.

A consultative approach should also be taken in relation to workplace health and safety issues to allow workers to express views before any decision is made. Participation of your workers in discussions about health and safety is important, as they are most likely to know about the risks of their work. Joint involvement in identifying hazards and assessing and controlling workplace risks will help build worker commitment to this process and any changes that may result.

See [Fair Work Australia](#) for a list of awards.

NOTE: The information in this guide is intended to be general advice only. Please contact Tracey Stewart at Management 101 for further assistance specific to the context of your organisation.

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