

Responding to COVID-19

A coronavirus infection (COVID-19) can cause mild to severe respiratory illness. Symptoms can range from mild illness to pneumonia. Affected people may experience fever or acute respiratory infection (shortness of breath or cough).

wattsnext recommendations to employers:

- Send [wattsnext Keep Calm & Wash Your Hands](#) flyer to staff and provide them with regular updates;
- Ensure you have a consistent approach in how you treat employees;
- Communicate why you are making decisions to staff, listen to them and remind them of the importance of not overreacting to prevent panic;
- Work together with employees to find appropriate solutions that suits the needs of the individual, workplace and staff encouraging a supportive environment free of panic and/or discrimination;
- Ensure your employees follow the required self-quarantine measure upon returning from travel;
- Where you can, ensure enhanced hygiene practices (i.e. availability of hand sanitisers, coughing and sneezing hygiene);
- Start thinking about a plan should a lockdown be enforced, for example:
 - Ask your employees to take their laptops with them at the end of each day;
 - Ask your employees to set up useful apps on their phones (i.e. Teams, Outlook, Workflowmax) to help them remain connected and productive;
 - Have the required equipment ready to be accessed by employees who will have to set up their office at home;
 - Implement morning and afternoon update meetings (10-15 minutes) to ensure employees remain connected and share updates;
- Consider postponing business trips or large gatherings;
- Start considering ways to implement forms of 'social distancing', for example:
 - Run a skeleton staff in the workplace and allow the rest of the team to work from home;
 - Rotate working from home arrangements each week;
 - Have your meetings moved to Audio Visual platforms (i.e. Zoom, Teams)
- Consider creating a point of contact for employees to report to if they or someone they had contact with is diagnosed or exposed to coronavirus;

- Avoid disclosing personal information (i.e. names of infected employees, or those who may have been exposed or are self-isolating);
- Remain in regular contact with employees who cannot be at work to ensure that isolation does not impact their mental health and wellbeing;
- Keep in mind your business' reputation, culture and wellbeing impact versus the risk of infection;
- Monitor the World Health Organisation and Department of Health websites for further updates.

FAQs

1. Can I request employees stay home / not work / take leave, if they have flu-like symptoms?

If an employee is experiencing flu-like symptoms you can ask that they:

- Provide a medical certificate before returning to work; and
- If possible or required, do some work from home until they are fully cleared to return.

You cannot instruct them to take leave.

If a GP has determined that the employee is not fit to work, that employee then needs to take sick leave.

If an employee is deemed fit to work by a GP, then it is unreasonable to force them to work from home or remain on leave. If you have concerns, you can request further information from the GP before allowing the employee to return.

2. Can I ask employees about their symptoms if they call in sick?

Legally, when an employee calls in sick, they just need to let their employer know how long they expect to be off. However, you can inform them that if they are experiencing flu-like symptoms that they are required to provide a medical certificate from their doctor stating that they are fit to be at work.

3. What can I do if an employee is returning from overseas travel?

Ensure they observe the prescribed self-isolation period of 14 days.

You may ask:

- The employee to provide a medical certificate before returning to work; and
- If possible, with the work you do, the employee to work from home for the self-isolation period.

4. What if employees can't work from home?

We recognise that working from home is not an option for all businesses. If employees cannot work from home or do not want to work from home (because they don't have the resources or feel it is an unreasonable request), you can request they provide a medical certificate that determines whether the employee is fit to return to work. If you encounter this situation [wattsnext](#) can give you a letter to issue the employee with specific questions for the doctor.

5. What happens if an employee wants to work from home as a precaution?

If an employee wants to work from home, they need to make a formal request. You will have to evaluate this request, but you may refuse if it is not suitable for the business or the type of work.

Alternatively, the employee may request to take leave, which is subject to the normal leave application process in the workplace.

6. What do I do if an employee has been notified that they may have been in contact with a confirmed case of COVID-19?

The employee will have to follow the requirements prescribed by the Department of Health which will be communicated directly to them through the appropriate government channels. You will have to notify your other employees of the circumstance and reinforce precautionary measures. **wattsnext** can provide a template notification letter.

7. What do I do if an employee has tested positive to COVID-19?

The Department of Health will make contact directly with all people who have potentially been in contact with an infected employee and will require them to isolate for 14 days from the day of the potential exposure.

For the employees who are requested to isolate (but are not unwell), you can: 1) offer them to work from home and pay them regularly; 2) agree to pay them personal leave (even if they are not unwell); 3) agree to pay them annual leave; 4) should they have exhausted all the leave available to them, leave will be unpaid.

As this in an evolving situation, wattsnext communications are intended to provide general guidance, each scenario needing to be addressed on a case by case basis. Formal legal and / or medical advice may need to be sought depending on the specific circumstances.

If you have any further questions re. the coronavirus, the team at wattsnext are more than happy to help – 1300 092 887.