



# The Occupational Safety and Health Authority and Agency

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## Guidance COVID-19: Guidance for employers and business

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### 1. Background and scope of guidance

This guidance will assist employers and businesses in providing advice to staff on:

- The novel coronavirus, COVID-19
- How to help prevent spread of all respiratory infections including COVID-19
- What to do if someone with suspected or confirmed to have COVID-19 has been in a workplace setting
- What advice to give to individuals who have travelled to specific areas, as outlined by the relevant authorities.
- Advice for the certification of absence from work resulting from COVID-19

### 2. Information about the virus

A coronavirus is a type of virus. As a group, coronaviruses are common across the world. COVID-19 is a new strain of coronavirus first identified in Wuhan City, China in January 2020.

The incubation period of COVID-19 is between 2 to 14 days. This means that if a person remains well 14 days after contact with someone with confirmed coronavirus, they are unlikely to be infected.

### 3. Signs and symptoms of COVID-19

The following symptoms may develop in the 14 days after exposure to someone who has COVID-19 infection:

- Cough
- Difficulty in breathing
- Fever

Generally, these infections can cause more severe symptoms in people with weakened immune systems, older people, and those with long-term conditions like diabetes, cancer and chronic lung disease.

### 4. How COVID-19 is spread

From what we know about other coronaviruses, spread of COVID-19 is most likely to happen when there is close contact (within 2 metres or less) with an infected person. It is likely that the risk increases the longer someone has close contact with an infected person.

Respiratory secretions produced when an infected person coughs or sneezes containing the virus are most likely to be the main means of transmission.

There are 2 main routes by which people can spread COVID-19:

- Infection can be spread to people who are nearby (within 2 metres) or possibly could be inhaled into the lungs.
- It is also possible that someone may become infected by touching a surface, object or the hand of an infected person that has been contaminated with respiratory secretions and then touching their own mouth, nose, or eyes (such as touching door knob or shaking hands then touching own face).

There is currently little evidence that people who are without symptoms are infectious to others.

## **5. Preventing spread of infection**

There is currently no vaccine to prevent COVID-19. The best way to prevent infection is to avoid being exposed to the virus.

The Ministry of Health recommends that the following general cold and flu precautions are taken to help prevent people from catching and spreading COVID-19:

If you develop symptoms after coming from a country with the COVID-19, please seek medical attention at the nearest health facility.

People who have returned from Hubei Province, including Wuhan, or any affected country in the last 14 days should self-isolate whether they have symptoms or not. This includes avoiding attending an education setting or work until 14 days after they leave Hubei Province.

People who have returned from Hubei Province, including Wuhan, or any affected country in the last 14 days should avoid attending work. They should call the Ministry of Health for advice and self-isolate.

## **6. How long the virus can survive**

How long any respiratory virus survives will depend on a number of factors, for example:

- What surface the virus is on.
- Whether it is exposed to sunlight.
- Differences in temperature and humidity.
- Exposure to cleaning products.

Under most circumstances, the amount of infectious virus on any contaminated surfaces is likely to have decreased significantly by 72 hours.

We know that similar viruses are transferred to and by people's hands. Therefore, regular hand hygiene and cleaning of frequently touched surfaces will help to reduce the risk of infection.

## **7. Guidance on facemasks**

Employees are not recommended to wear facemasks (also known as surgical masks or respirators) to protect against the virus. Facemasks are only recommended to be worn by symptomatic individuals (advised by a healthcare worker) to reduce the risk of transmitting the infection to other people.

Ministry of Health recommends that the best way to reduce any risk of infection is good hygiene and avoiding direct or close contact with any potentially infected person. Any member of staff who deals with members of the public from behind a full screen will be protected from airborne particles.

## **8. What to do if an employee or a member of the public becomes unwell and believe they have been exposed to COVID-19**

If the person has not been to specified affected areas in the last 14 days, then normal practice should continue.

The Ministry of Health is advising persons who experience any flu like symptoms to remain at home and get treatment immediately. If the symptoms manifest at work, the affected employee should be immediately isolated and arrangements made for him or her to proceed home or to the nearest medical facility.

If someone becomes unwell in the workplace and has travelled to China or other affected countries, the unwell person should be removed to an area which is at least 2 metres away from other people. If possible find a room or area where they can be isolated behind a closed door, such as a staff office. If it is possible to open a window, do so for ventilation.

Whilst they wait for advice from the Ministry of Health or an ambulance to arrive, they should remain at least 2 metres from other people. They should avoid touching people, surfaces and objects and be advised to cover their mouth and nose with a disposable tissue when they cough or sneeze and put the tissue in a bag or pocket then throw the tissue in the bin. If they don't have any tissues available, they should cough and sneeze into the crook of their elbow.

If they need to go to the bathroom whilst waiting for medical assistance, they should use a separate bathroom if available. This bathroom should be sanitized after each use.

### **9. Returning from travel overseas to affected areas**

People who have returned from any country affected with COVID-19 under containment measures in the last 14 days should avoid attending work.

All other staff should continue to attend work.

### **10. What to do if a member of staff or the public with suspected COVID-19 has recently been in your workplace**

For contacts of a suspected case in the workplace, no restrictions or special control measures are required while laboratory test results for COVID-19 are awaited. In particular, there is no need to close the workplace or send other staff home at this point. Most possible cases turn out to be negative. Therefore, until the outcome of test results is known there is no action that the workplace needs to take.

### **11. What to do if a member of staff or the public with confirmed COVID-19 has recently been in your workplace**

Closure of the workplace is not recommended.

The management team of the office or workplace should contact the relevant authorities to discuss the case, identify people who have been in contact with them and advise on any actions or precautions that should be taken.

### **12. When individuals in the workplace have had contact with a confirmed case of COVID-19**

If a confirmed case is identified in your workplace, the local Health authority should be notified to provide the relevant staff with advice. These include:

- Any employee in close face-to-face or touching contact
- Talking with or being coughed on for any length of time while the employee was symptomatic
- Anyone who has cleaned up any bodily fluids
- Close friendship groups or workgroups
- Any employee living in the same household as a confirmed case

Persons who have come in contact with infected persons are not considered cases, if they are well they are very unlikely to have spread the infection to others. However they should observe the following measures:

- Self-isolate at home for 14 days from the last time they had contact with the confirmed case and follow the home isolation guideline issued by the Ministry of Health.
- Follow up with local health care providers.
- If new symptoms develop or existing symptoms worsen within the 14-day observation period call the local health care provider. Persons with coughing, fever or shortness of breath will be tested for COVID-19.
- If they are unwell at any time within their 14-day observation period and they test positive for COVID-19 they will become a confirmed case and will be treated for the infection.

Staff who have not had close contact with the original confirmed case do not need to take any precautions and can continue to attend work.

### **13. Certifying absence from work**

Medical evidence (sick leave certificate) is not required for the first 2 days of sickness. From the third day, the employee is required to produce a sick leave certificate signed by a recognised medical practitioner in Trinidad and Tobago. It may be wise to request a fitness certificate before the employee returns to work if he or she was diagnosed with COVID-19.

We strongly suggest that employers use their discretion around the need for medical evidence for a period of absence where an employee is advised to self-isolate due to suspected COVID-19, in accordance with the public health guidelines being issued by the government.

Employers should consider paid sick leave for workers on self-isolation or quarantined.

### **14. Advice for staff returning from travel anywhere else in the world within the last 14 days**

Currently, there are minimal cases outside the listed areas and therefore the likelihood of an individual coming into contact with a confirmed case is extremely low.

These staff can continue to attend work unless they have been informed that they have had contact with a confirmed case of COVID-19.

### **15. Handling post, packages or food from affected areas**

Employees should continue to follow existing risk assessments and safe systems of work. There is no perceived increase in risk for handling post or freight from specified areas.

### **16. Cleaning offices and public spaces where there are suspected or confirmed cases of COVID-19**

Coronavirus symptoms are similar to a flu-like illness and include cough, fever, or shortness of breath. Once symptomatic, all surfaces that the person has come into contact with must be cleaned including:

If a person becomes ill in a shared space, these should be cleaned using disposable cloths and household detergents, according to current recommended workplace legislation and practice.

### **17. Rubbish disposal, including tissues**

All waste that has been in contact with a suspected individual, including used tissues, and mask, should be put in a plastic rubbish bag and tied when full. The plastic bag should then be placed in a second bin bag and tied. It should be put in a safe place and marked for storage until the result is available. If the individual tests negative, this can be put in the normal waste.

Should the individual test positive, seek instructions from the local authorities on what to do with the waste.

The Occupational Safety and Health Agency will continue to monitor the situation and provide advice as it becomes necessary.

Updates will be posted to our website **[www.osha.gov.tt](http://www.osha.gov.tt)** and our social media platforms.

You are also encouraged to follow the updates by other relevant authorities like the Ministry of Health.

Resources available:

**[www.health.gov.tt](http://www.health.gov.tt)**

**For more information: [www.osha.gov.tt](http://www.osha.gov.tt)**