

HR Policy

CORONAVIRUS (COVID-19)



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POLICY: CORONAVIRUS (COVID-19)

Regulations specific to COVID-19 have not as yet been published. Such regulations shall override an employer's HR Policy and Procedure.

This official guidance should serve as the foundation for organizational decisions about health- and legal-risk mitigation. Being able to demonstrate corporate policy alignment with official recommendations can be an important legal safeguard in cases where the company's infection-control efforts are challenged.

The priority for governments and the global community is to prevent people from contracting the disease and to cure those who do. Given the virus' rapid contagion, action can help ensure that countries' health systems—including those that have limited capacity—do not become overwhelmed.

Name of the Viruses and the Disease

The pandemic we are dealing with refers to a disease called COVID-19. COVID-19 is caused by a coronavirus that is called SARS-CoV-2. Likewise, the disease that we commonly call 'The Flu' is caused by a group of viruses that is called influenza. An example of a specific Influenza virus is H1N1 which caused the Swine Flu. Influenza and corona viruses are not the same virus family, although the diseases they cause are very similar.

The symptoms of COVID-19 include cough, sore throat, shortness of breath or fever. However, these are also symptoms of the flu. The National Institute of Communicable Diseases (NICD) recommends that you should only get tested if you display symptoms plus:

- Been in contact with a confirmed COVID-19 person;
- Travelled to a high-risk country;
- Worked in or been to a healthcare facility treating people with Covid-19;
- Have a severe case of pneumonia with an unknown cause.

However, one should consult your medical practitioner immediately if you display symptoms.

Biology

The coronavirus, or COVID-19, as the new virus is called, will cause symptoms similar to Influenza virus (common flu). The most common symptoms are fever (88%) and dry cough (68%). Exhaustion (38%), expectoration of mucus when coughing (33%), shortness of breath (18%), sore throat (14%), headaches (14%), muscle aches (14%), chills (11%) are also common. Less frequent are nausea and vomiting (5%), stuffy nose (5%) and diarrhoea (4%). Running nose is not a symptom of COVID-19.

Spread of the virus is most often (78-85%) caused by an infection within the family by droplets and other carriers of infection in close contact with an infected person. Transmission by fine aerosols in the air over long distances is not one of the main causes of spread.

The vast majority of those infected sooner or later develop symptoms. Cases of people in whom the virus has been detected and who do not have symptoms at that time are rare - and most of them fall ill in the next few days. The duration from the beginning of the disease until recovery is only two weeks on average for the mildly ill but can be longer for severe and critical patients.

Pandemic

COVID-19 is a pandemic, which means that it is present all over the world. The greatest threat lies in the mass hysteria that media has created calling it a 'deadly' virus and making people believe that we will die. In South Africa, 11,000 people die every year of Influenza. The proportion of people infected with Influenza who die is 0.1-2%. The variation depends on the different strain of Flue-virus each year.

The estimated number of people that have died from COVID-19 is between 1.4-3.4%. This number is very difficult to calculate as it requires that you know the total number of people that were infected. For example, if 3 people out of 100 people died, the death rate would be 3%. But if there were in fact 1000 people who were actually infected but 900 of them never had themselves tested, the real number would be 3 deaths out of 1000 people, and the death rate would be 0.3%.

The chance of dying depends on your age, gender and other pre-existing conditions. In China it is shown that women and men are equally infected by the virus, but men were more likely to die. It is hypothesised that this may be because in China the majority of men smoke, whereas almost none of the women do.

The younger you are, the less likely you are to be infected and the less likely you are to fall seriously ill if you do get infected. However, your personal likelihood of getting infected or die is influenced by other risk factors, such as cancer, uncontrolled diabetes, chronic respiratory diseases and being immune compromised.

HIV and the Impact from the Virus

Although HIV weakens the immune system, Anti-Retroviral Treatment (ART) stops the HIV virus from replicating and thereby the immune system strengthens. Evidence from other countries have shown a direct link between increasing roll-out of ART and reduction of the number of Tuberculosis (TB) cases. ART is sometimes called the best prevention and treatment of TB. In short, if you are infected with HIV and take ART regularly your immune system bounces back to a level that is comparable to not being infected with HIV.

With regards to COVID-19, the recommendation is:

- Know your HIV status
- Take your ART

Seeing that COVID-19 is essentially 'a flu-virus', the only current difference with it being 'new' is that there is not yet a vaccine. Therefore, if you are normally worried about Influenza and used to getting vaccinated every flue-season, you may be worried now. Over 20 different vaccines studies are under way and a vaccine should soon be available.

Infection Control

You can only be infected if the virus enters your mucus membranes either via your eyes, your nose or your mouth. The virus cannot enter through your skin. Therefore, if you have virus on your hands you will not get sick unless you touch your eyes, mouth or nose.

Handwash is the best way to protect yourself and others. It is the soap (not the water) that kills the virus when you wash your hands. Therefore, make sure to work up a good lather and wash your hands thoroughly for 20 seconds (long enough to sing Happy Birthday two times). Make sure to wash the back of your hands, your wrists, your fingers and under your fingernails.

If you don't have access to soap and water, you can use hand sanitizer but do not replace your handwashing with hand sanitizer.

You should wash your hands frequently so that you minimise spread to others. When you cough, you should use standard cough etiquette and cough into a napkin that you throw away immediately afterwards or you should cough into your bent elbow.

Who should be tested for COVID-19?

- A person with acute respiratory illness (fever and at least one sign/symptom of respiratory disease (e.g., cough, shortness of breath) and with no other aetiology that fully explains the clinical presentation and a history of travel to or residence in a country/area or territory reporting local transmission of Covid-19 disease during the 14 days prior to symptom onset; or
- A person with any acute respiratory illness and having been in contact with a confirmed or probable Covid-19 case in the last 14 days prior to the onset of symptoms; or
- A person with severe acute respiratory infection (fever and at least one sign/symptom of respiratory disease e.g., cough, shortness breath) and requiring hospitalisation and with no other aetiology that fully explains the clinical presentation.

Laboratory Testing:

Patients will only be tested if referred by a doctor and it will prioritise individuals that fulfil epidemiological and clinical case definitions as outlined by the National Institute for Communicable Diseases (NICD).

The expected turnaround time is 48 hours but is dependent on where the sample is coming from.

Currently, government laboratories only test people who recently travelled to high-risk countries and those who come into contact with people who tested positive for the virus.

Voluntary tests can only be done privately and the cost to do so is estimated to be around R1 400 for medical aid members and R 900 for cash payers.

Social Distancing vs Self-Isolation vs Quarantine

Social Distancing:

What is it? Social distancing practices are changes in behavior that can help stop the spread of infections. These often include curtailing social contact, work and schooling among seemingly healthy individuals, with a view to delaying transmission and reducing the size of an outbreak.

For example, our Government has made it illegal to gather in groups of 100 people, closing schools early and advising people not to travel with public transport.

Who is it for? People who have not been exposed to the virus (everyone should do this)

For how long? At this moment it will be indefinitely till we are advised otherwise.

Who can you interact with? Small groups of people such as family or friends but limited physical contact.

Self-Isolation

What is it? Self-isolation is a way to keep yourself from possibly infecting others if you think you might be infected. It involves limiting contact with public places, relatives, friends, colleagues, and public transport. So, staying confined to your home.

Who is it for? People who think they might have the virus but haven't tested yet.

For how long? At least 14 days as symptoms will show in that time. If you become symptomatic during that time and qualify for a covid19 test, get tested. Contact your healthcare provider (telephonically) for advice if you have symptoms but don't qualify for testing. If you test negative, you can leave self-isolation when you are better. If you test positive you might be placed into quarantine at a hospital or health facility or you may be allowed to remain in self-isolation, this will be for a minimum of 7 days since the start of symptoms. Whether you can remain home with a positive test will be decided by healthcare providers (DOH).

Who can you interact with? Nobody directly. Stay in your room alone if you live with other people or in your house/apartment if you live alone. Have friends/family deliver supplies to you since you cannot leave the house/apartment, but do not have direct contact with them (touch or talk).

How does it affect your work? In keeping with the basic conditions of employment, annual leave will be taken until such time that a positive SARS-CoV-2 test result is produced, the leave type will then become sick leave. If sick-leave days are exhausted during this time, annual leave or unpaid leave will apply for the duration of self-isolation. Guidelines are not yet issued by government with regards to 'special leave'. Hence, this section may be revised.

How does it affect your work? Be mindful when sharing office space, utensils, stationary, and practice extra hygiene habits. Limited physical meetings, more skype /internet team meetings.

Quarantine:

What is this? It is isolating those who have been exposed to the virus, such as travelers from high risk countries or people who had contact with someone with a positive corona test, who aren't symptomatic yet. SA DOH also refers to isolating those with positive tests in hospital as quarantine. It can be done at home (if DOH approves) or at a dedicated health facility.

Who is it for? People with exposure to known cases or traveling from high risk countries. According to SA DOH also those who tested positive for covid19.

For how long: Those who don't have symptoms will remain in quarantine for at least 14 days. Those who are symptomatic at least 7 days since the start of symptoms. DOH however requires a confirmed negative test in those who initially tested positive before releasing them from quarantine.

Who can you interact with? Nobody directly. Stay in your room alone if you live with other people or in your house/apartment if you live alone. Have friends/family deliver supplies to you since you cannot leave the house/apartment, but do not have direct contact with them (touch or talk). If you are admitted, you will be isolated and have reduced contact with people other than healthcare workers

How does it affect your work/Leave? In a case of quarantine due to COVID-19, sick leave will be awarded to employees. If sick-leave days are exhausted during this time, annual leave or unpaid leave will apply for the duration of your time in quarantine. Guidelines are not yet issued by government with regards to 'special leave'. Hence, this section may be revised.

SOCIAL DISTANCING GUIDELINES AT WORK

-  **1** Avoid in-person meetings. Use online conferencing, email or the phone when possible, even when people are in the same building.
-  **2** Unavoidable in-person meetings should be short, in a large meeting room where people can sit at least three feet from each other; avoid shaking hands.
-  **3** Eliminate unnecessary travel and cancel or postpone nonessential meetings, gatherings, workshops and training sessions.
-  **4** Do not congregate in work rooms, pantries, copier rooms or other areas where people socialize. Keep six feet apart when possible.
-  **5** Bring lunch and eat at your desk or away from others (avoid lunchrooms and crowded restaurants).
-  **6** Avoid public transportation (walk, cycle, drive a car) or go early or late to avoid rush-hour crowding on public transportation.
-  **7** Limit recreational or other leisure classes, meetings, activities, etc., where close contact with others is likely.

Communication to Employees

There are many issues that need to be quickly addressed by organisations, and many are floundering.

In order to curb unnecessary absenteeism and unnecessary panic, employers will need to ensure that there is good communication to all employees to:

- Keep everyone updated on actions being taken to reduce risks of exposure in the workplace
- Make sure everyone's contact numbers and emergency contact details are up to date
- Make sure managers know how to spot symptoms of coronavirus and are clear on any relevant processes, and procedures in case someone in the workplace develops the virus
- Make sure there are clean places to wash hands with hot water and soap, and encourage everyone to wash their hands regularly
- Give out hand sanitisers and tissues to staff, and encourage them to use them
- Consider if any travel planned to affected areas is essential
- Let their employer know as soon as possible if they're not able to go to work.

Simple ways to prevent the spread of COVID-19 in your workplace

The low-cost measures below will help prevent the spread of infections in your workplace, such as colds, flu and stomach bugs, and protect your customers, contractors and employees.

It will help reduce working days lost due to illness and stop or slow the spread of COVID-19 at your workplaces.

- Make sure your workplaces are clean and hygienic
- Surfaces (e.g. desks and tables) and objects (e.g. telephones, keyboards) need to be wiped with disinfectant regularly.

Why? Because contamination on surfaces touched by employees and customers is one of the main ways that COVID-19 spreads

Promote regular and thorough handwashing by employees, contractors and customers

- Put sanitizing hand rub dispensers in prominent places around the workplace.
- Make sure these dispensers are regularly refilled
- Display posters promoting hand-washing – ask your local public health authority for these or look on www.WHO.int.
- Combine this with other communication measures such as offering guidance from occupational health and safety officers, briefings at meetings and information on the intranet to promote handwashing
- Make sure that staff, contractors and customers have access to places where they can wash their hands with soap and water.

Why? Because washing kills the virus on your hands and prevents the spread of COVID19

Promote good respiratory hygiene in the workplace

- Display posters promoting respiratory hygiene.
- Combine this with other communication measures such as offering guidance from occupational health and safety officers, briefing at meetings and information on the intranet etc.
- Ensure that face masks¹ and / or paper tissues are available at your workplaces, for those who develop a runny nose or cough at work, along with closed bins for hygienically disposing of them

Why? Because good respiratory hygiene prevents the spread of COVID-19

Managing and Evaluating Leave

Employers need to make sure company policies on absenteeism in the workplace are in place and updated to accommodate the current pandemic with COVID-19.

They should consider how to identify persons who may be at risk, and support them, without inviting stigma and discrimination into the workplace. This could include staff who have recently travelled to an area reporting cases, or other staff who have conditions that put them at higher risk of serious illness (e.g. diabetes, heart and lung disease, immuno-compromised conditions and older age).

Employers will need to find ways to differentiate between employees who validly need to be off work and those who are self-quarantining themselves without cause.

Employers should analyse their legal obligations to provide employees with leave in the event of sickness and evaluate whether their policies need to be adjusted in the current circumstances.

It is also compulsory for employers to accommodate the situation by applying the laws stated in the Basic Conditions of Employment Act - SA, or consider “Special Leave” which does not impact the employees sick or annual leave days.

Types of Absenteeism Reasons:

In managing absenteeism, employers can expect to manage five types of absences:

- Employees infected with the coronavirus;
- Employees who must take care of an immediate family member infected with the coronavirus;
- Employees who refuse to report to work for fear of being exposed to the virus at work or during travel to work;
- Employees absent from work due to a preventive withdrawal (self-quarantine) and the perception that the workplace is now a high-risk zone according to their specific medical condition; and

- Employees in "quarantine" after being in contact with coronavirus-positive individuals. Quarantine may be requested by the employer to limit the risk of contamination or by a health care professional, as part of a medical protocol.

If someone is not sick but cannot work because they're in self-quarantine or forced isolation, there is no legal obligation on an employer to pay, however if the employee has been told not to come to work for the following reasons:

- have been told by a medical expert to self-isolate
- have had to go into quarantine
- are abroad in an affected area and are not allowed to travel back to South Africa

It may be good practice for their employer to treat it as sick leave and follow their usual sick leave policy. Otherwise there's a risk the employee will come to work because they want to get paid, and spread the virus if indeed they have contracted it.

Some employees may feel they do not want to go to work if they're afraid of catching coronavirus. An employer should listen to any concerns staff may have. If there are genuine concerns, the employer must try to resolve them to protect the health and safety of their staff. An employer can, if possible, offer working from home. If an employee still does not want to go in, they may be able to arrange with their employer to take the time off as annual or unpaid leave which does not constitute sick leave.

**STATEMENT BY PRESIDENT CYRIL RAMAPHOSA, ON THE 15TH MARCH 2020,
ON MEASURES TO COMBAT COVID-19 EPIDEMIC**

Following an extensive analysis of the progression of the disease worldwide and in South Africa, Cabinet has decided on the following measures:

Firstly, to limit contact between persons who may be infected and South African citizens.

We are imposing a travel ban on foreign nationals from high-risk countries such as Italy, Iran, South Korea, Spain, Germany, the United States, the United Kingdom and China as from 18 March 2020.

We have cancelled visas to visitors from those countries from today and previously granted visas are hereby revoked.

South African citizens are advised to refrain from all forms of travel to or through the European Union, United States, United Kingdom and other identified high-risk countries such as China, Iran and South Korea. This is effective immediately.

Government will continue to regularly issue travel alerts referring to specific cities, countries or regions as the situation evolves based on the risk level.

Any foreign national who has visited high-risk countries in the past 20 days will be denied a visa.

South African citizens returning from high-risk countries will be subjected to testing and self-isolation or quarantine on return to South Africa.

Travellers from medium-risk countries - such as Portugal, Hong Kong and Singapore - will be required to undergo high intensity screening.

All travellers who have entered South Africa from high-risk countries since mid-February will be required to present themselves for testing.

We will strengthen surveillance, screening and testing measures at OR Tambo, Cape Town and King Shaka International Airports. South Africa has 72 ports of entry in the country which are land, sea and airports.

Of the 53 land ports, 35 will be shut down with effect from Monday 16 March.

2 of the 8 seaports will be closed for passengers and crew changes.

Effective immediately, all non-essential travel for all spheres of government outside of the Republic is prohibited.

We further discourage all non-essential domestic travel, particularly by air, rail, taxis and bus.

Secondly, it is essential therefore that we minimize the risk of the spread of this virus by limiting contact amongst groups of people.

While we appreciate the economic, religious, and cultural significance of social and community gatherings, the coronavirus is spread through contact between persons.

As we have said before, the current circumstances require extraordinary measures to curb the spread of infections. Countries that have heeded the call to implement these radical measures, have fared much better than those that do not.

Therefore, to encourage social distancing Cabinet has decided on these additional measures:

Gatherings of more than 100 people will be prohibited.

Mass celebrations of upcoming national days such as Human Rights Day and other large government events will be cancelled.

Where small gatherings are unavoidable, organisers will need to put in place stringent measures of prevention and control.

Schools will be closed from Wednesday, 18 March, and will remain closed until after the Easter Weekend. To compensate, the mid-year school holidays will be shortened by a week.

Government is working closely with colleges, universities and other public facilities such as Parliament, prisons, police stations and military installations to intensify hygiene control.

Visits to all correctional centres are suspended for 30 days with immediate effect.

Government is aware of the confirmed case of a student who has tested positive for the coronavirus at Wits University.

Those who have been in contact with the student will be quarantined.

The Minister of Higher Education, Science and Innovation is consulting with vice chancellors of universities and colleges across the country and will soon be announcing measures in this regard.

We call on all businesses including mining, retail, banking, farming to ensure that they take all necessary measures to intensify hygiene control.

We also call on the management of malls, entertainment centres and other places frequented by large numbers of people to bolster their hygiene control.

Thirdly, to further strengthen our health response:

Government is strengthening its surveillance and testing systems.

We are in process of identifying isolation and quarantine sites in each district and metro.

Capacity is being increased at designated hospitals in all provinces.

We are also increasing the capacity of existing contact tracing processes.

We are partnering with the private sector to set up a national tracking, tracing and monitoring system of all people infected with the coronavirus and those they have been in contact with.

We are undertaking a mass communication campaign on good hygiene and effective prevention behaviour.

Therefore, we are calling on everyone to:

- Wash their hands frequently with soap and water or hand sanitisers for at least 20 seconds.
- Cover their nose and mouth when coughing and sneezing with tissue or flexed elbow.
- Avoid close contact with anyone with cold or flu-like symptoms.

In essence, we are calling for a change of behaviour amongst all South Africans.

We must minimise physical contact with other people, and, encourage the elbow greeting rather than shaking hands.