Strategies to Manage the Impact of Coronavirus (COVID-19) on Your Employees

Introduction

The current outbreak of the Covid-19 strain of coronavirus was first reported from Wuhan, China on 31st December 2019, and the world has been watching closely ever since.

On the 11th March 2020, the World Health Organisation (WHO) classified COVID-19 as a pandemic.

The WHO and the Australian Government, Department of Health are continuing to expand their knowledge and advise on this new virus (officially called Covid-19) to provide individual's worldwide with advice on measures to protect their health and reduce the spread of this outbreak.

Businesses are required to identify hazards, and their associated risks, in the workplace and take reasonable action to eliminate or minimise the risk when elimination is not possible. This includes preventing exposure to widespread acute respiratory illnesses, including the coronavirus.

This tip sheet provides some up-to-date information on what the coronavirus is, how individuals can protect themselves and some recommended strategies for employers to use.

What is Coronavirus?

The word coronavirus refers to a large family of viruses that cause illness ranging from the common cold to more severe diseases. In December 2019 a new strain not previously identified in humans was first reported in Wuhan, China. This novel coronavirus disease has now officially been called Covid-19 by the World Health Organisation (WHO). Symptoms of this virus range from a mild cough to pneumonia, with the virus being spread from person to person. It takes between 2 and 10 days before people who are infected become sick and develop a fever and show symptoms of the virus.

As of the 15th March, there were 249 cases of Covid-19 confirmed in Australia, including 3 deaths. Across the world, there have been more than 154,480 confirmed cases of coronavirus (COVID-19) and more than 5,700 reported deaths.

For current and up-to-date information on the latest medical advice and official reports, please visit the Australian Government Coronavirus COVID-19 Health Alert website.

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How to Protect Yourself?

On 27 February 2020, the Prime Minister announced the activation of the 'Australian Health Sector Emergency Response Plan for Novel Coronavirus (COVID-19)'. As with all viruses, the Department of Health recommend practicing good hand and respiratory hygiene to reduce the risk of spreading.

Good hand hygiene **-** Wash your hands frequently using soap and water, or an alcohol-based hand rub to eliminate the virus on your hands.

Good respiratory hygiene – Cover your mouth when coughing or sneezing, discard tissues immediately and clean your hands.

To help slow the spread of COVID-19, the Australian Government has advised, effective from Monday 16 March 2020, organised, non-essential gatherings should be limited to 500 people. Non-essential meetings or conferences of critical workforces, such as health care professionals and emergency services, should also be limited.

Myth-busters

Can people receiving packages from China contract coronavirus?
No, you are not at risk of contracting the new coronavirus. The WHO reports that the coronaviruses do not survive long on objects such as packages.

Are older or younger people more susceptible to the new coronavirus?
WHO confirms that people of all ages can be infected, however people with pre-existing medical conditions (such as asthma, diabetes, heart disease) appear more vulnerable. Despite this, people of all ages should take steps to protect themselves.

Are antibiotics effective in preventing and treating the new virus?
No. The new coronavirus is a virus so antibiotics are not used in prevention or treatment.

Recommended Strategies for Employers

- Provide information to staff that has been obtained from reputable and reliable sources to reduce any potential hysteria or fear around the outbreak.

- Encourage staff to practice good hand and respiratory hygiene by providing adequate soap or alcohol-based hand rub in the workspace especially in bathrooms, kitchens, waiting areas or other commonly used areas.

- Place posters that encourage good hand and respiratory hygiene at the entrance to your workplace, or in other areas likely to be seen.

- Pay attention to travel warnings and consider adjusting staff travel to countries including China, if recommended.

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- Ensure your sick leave policies are consistent with recommended guidelines, and that employees are aware of these policies.

- Employers are encouraged to maintain flexible policies where possible that permit quarantined employees, or those required to stay home to care for a family member suspected of being infected from coronavirus, to access paid leave where possible or work from home.

- Perform routine environmental cleaning and provide disposable antibacterial wipes for commonly used surfaces such as keyboards, remotes, phone handsets.

- If an employee or their family member is sick with coronavirus support the employee to apply for leave or work-from-home if their role permits.

- If an employee is stuck overseas assist them to access adequate resources including overseas medical care and offer the company's EAP for phone-based counselling support.

- Review flexible working options, including work-from-home arrangements and consider cancelling or postponing domestic and/or international travel.

Support is Available

The World Health Organization continues to release up-to-date information on the Novel Coronavirus 2019 (Covid-19).

The Australian Government, Department of Health continues to monitor the outbreak in Australia with the latest medical advice and official reports.

If you have teams or individuals in your workplace who are impacted directly by the coronavirus or presenting with heightened anxiety, worry or fear of contracting the virus, reach out so we can provide guidance and support.

Acacia EAP offers support 24/7/365
1300 364 273

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