Return to Work Safely Protocol

Content

Introduction

As we begin to move to the next phase in reducing the spread of the virus, we need to make sure that we adhere to the rules of the new way of working, so we can continue to suppress the spread of the virus.

All workplaces operating during the COVID-19 pandemic need to ensure they are protecting their employees and minimising the risk of spread of infection. This summary is intended to introduce consistent measures in line with the Government's recommendations on social distancing. These are exceptional circumstances and all organisations must always comply with the latest Government advice on COVID-19.

The Government's Return to Work Safely Protocol ('the protocol') incorporates current advice about measures to reduce the spread of COVID-19 issued by the National Public Health Emergency Team (NPHET), in collaboration with the Health and Safety Authority (HSA), the Health Services Executive (HSE) and the Department of Health. This protocol document is designed to support employers and employees to put measures in place that will prevent the spread of COVID-19 in the workplace.

As the advice issued by NPHET continues to evolve, the protocol document and the measures employers and employees need to address may also change.

Working together to suppress COVID-19 in the workplace

Strong communication and a shared collaborative approach between employers and employees are key to protecting against the spread of COVID-19 in the workplace. Information and guidance should be provided to employees, which will include the signs and symptoms of COVID-19, how it spreads, cleaning routines and waste disposal as well as advice on hand and respiratory hygiene and physical distancing. Adherence to the protocol will only be achieved if employers and employees have a shared responsibility to implement the measures contained in this protocol in their place of work.

Symptoms of COVID-19

Exposure to COVID-19 is a public health risk which affects all citizens. Infection with the virus that causes COVID-19 can cause illness, ranging from mild to severe, and, in some cases, can be fatal. It can take anything from 2 days up to 14 days for symptoms of coronavirus to appear. They can be similar to the symptoms of cold and flu.

Common symptoms of coronavirus include:
- A fever (high temperature - 38 degrees Celsius or above).
- A cough - this can be any kind of cough, not just dry.
- Shortness of breath or breathing difficulties.
- For the complete list of symptoms, please refer to the HSE Website:
  https://www2.hse.ie/conditions/coronavirus/symptoms.html

How COVID-19 spreads

The virus that causes COVID-19 disease is spread from people in fluid and in droplets scattered from the nose or mouth of an infected person when the person with COVID-19 coughs, sneezes or speaks. The fluid or droplets land on objects and surfaces around the infected person. Other people contaminate their hands by touching these objects/surfaces and then bring the virus into contact with their eyes, nose or mouth by touching them with their contaminated hands. COVID-19 can also spread if droplets from an infected person land directly on the mucous membranes of the eye, nose or mouth of a person standing close to them.

It is still not known how long the virus survives on surfaces in different conditions. Studies indicate that it can persist on surfaces for hours and up to several days in the absence of effective cleaning. Thorough and regular cleaning of frequently touched surfaces is essential. If disinfection is required it must be performed in addition to cleaning, never as a substitute for cleaning.

Lead worker representative

An employer should appoint at least one lead worker representative whose role is to work collaboratively with the employer to assist in the implementation of measures and monitor adherence to the measures to prevent the spread of COVID -19. The number of representatives appointed will, ideally, be proportionate to the number of employees in the workplace and these key personnel will be clearly identifiable in the workplace. Every workplace should, have at least one worker representative in place to address the COVID-19 requirements. The worker representative will have a structured framework to follow within the organisation to be effective in preventing the spread of the virus. Regular weekly meetings should take place between the employer and the worker representatives in regards the measures being put in place to address the occupational exposure to COVID-19 in the workplace. For further information on the role of Safety Representative visit;
https://www.hsa.ie/eng/Topics/Safety_Representatives_and_Consultation_/

Implementing the COVID-19 prevention and control measures to minimise risk to employees

Before returning to work, the following pre-return to work steps should be in place and completed by both employers and employees.

Employers will:
- Update the businesses COVID-19 Response Plan:
- Update the occupational health and safety risk assessments and safety statement;
- Address the level(s) of risk associated with various workplaces and work activities in the COVID-19 business plans, taking into account:
  - employees individual risk factors (e.g. older employees, presence of underlying medical conditions, etc.);
  - how to deal with a suspected case of COVID-19;
  - what controls are necessary to address the risks identified;
  - what contingency measures need to be in place for an increase in the rate of employee's absenteeism.

- Keep a log of contact/group work to facilitate contact tracing and inform workers and others of the purpose of the log.
- Display information on signs and symptoms of COVID-19.
- Provide up to date information on the Public Health advice issued by the HSE.
- Provide instruction for workers to follow if they develop signs and symptoms of COVID-19 during work.

Employers should:
- Review and revise existing sick leave policies and amend as appropriate and in line with normal procedures, communicate any changes to employees, to highlight any changes that are introduced to reduce the spread of COVID-19.
- Ensure the occupational health service, if provided, is available to address any anxieties or concerns employees may have about COVID-19.
- The lead worker representative(s) appointed should be involved in communicating the health advice around COVID-19 in the workplace.
- Agree through negotiation with employees any temporary restructuring of work patterns that may be required to implement the COVID-19 prevention measures in the workplace. In so doing, any existing sectoral agreements must be taken into account.

As information about the virus is evolving, public health advice is being updated on a regular basis, and it is important for employers and employees to recognise that flexibility will be required in meeting the measures to reduce the spread.

Employers must issue a pre-return to work form for employees to complete at least 3 days in advance of the return to work. This form seeks confirmation that the employee, to the best of their knowledge, has no symptoms of COVID-19 and confirms that the employee is not self-isolating or awaiting the results of a COVID-19 test.

If an employee answers *Yes* to any of the questions, they are strongly advised to follow the medical advice they receive or seek medical advice before returning to work:

Do you have symptoms of cough, fever, high temperature, sore throat, runny nose, breathlessness, or flu like symptoms now or in the past 14 days?	Yes/No
Have you been diagnosed with confirmed or suspected COVID-19 infection in the last 14 days?	Yes/No
Are you a close contact of a person who is a confirmed or suspected case of COVID-19 in the past 14 days (i.e. less than 2m for more than 15 minutes accumulative in 1 day)?	Yes/No
Have you been advised by a doctor to self-isolate at this time?	Yes/No
Have you been advised by a doctor to cocoon at this time?	Yes/No

Induction training should be provided for all employees. This training should include:
- The latest up to-date advice and guidance on public health
- What an employee should do if they develop symptoms of COVID-19;
- Details of how the workplace is organised to address the risk from COVID-19;
- An outline of the COVID-19 response plan;
- Identification of points of contact from the employer and the employee; and
- Any other sector specific advice that is relevant.

Temperature testing in line with Public Health advice should be implemented.

Employees must:
- Make themselves aware of the signs and symptoms of COVID-19 and monitor their own wellbeing.
- Self-isolate at home and contact their GP promptly for further advice if they display any signs or symptoms.
- Report to managers immediately if any symptoms develop during the shift.
- Complete and return the pre-return to work form before they return to work.
- Inform their employer if there are any other circumstances relating to COVID-19, not included in the form, which may need to be disclosed to allow their safe return to work.
- Self-isolate at home and contact their GP promptly for further advice if they have any COVID-19 symptoms.
- Stay out of work until all symptoms have cleared following self-isolation.
- Participate in any induction training provided by the employer on their return to the workplace.
- Complete any temperature testing as implemented by the employer and in line with Public Health advice.

To assist with the return to work, details of existing supports and resources in place for businesses impacted by COVID-19 are on the following website: https://dbei.gov.ie/en/Publications/Supports-for-businesses-COVID-19.html

Hand hygiene
Regular hand washing with soap and water is effective for the removal of COVID-19.

Employers must:
- Ensure that appropriate hygiene facilities are in place to accommodate workers adhering to hand hygiene measures.
- Make available advice and training on how to perform hand hygiene effectively: (https://www2.hse.ie/wellbeing/how-to-wash-your-hands.html)
- Display posters on how to wash hands in appropriate locations: (https://www.hse.ie/eng/services/news/newsfeatures/covid19-updates/partnerresources/hand-hygiene-poster-english.pdf)

Employees must:
- Ensure they are familiar with and follow hand hygiene guidance and advice:
  https://www2.hse.ie/wellbeing/how-to-wash-your-hands.html
- Wash their hands with soap and water or with an alcohol-based hand rub regularly and in particular:
  - after coughing and sneezing,
  - before and after eating,
  - before and after preparing food,
  - if in contact with someone who is displaying any COVID-19 symptoms,
  - before and after being on public transport (if using it),
  - before and after being in a crowd,
  - when arriving and leaving the workplace,
  - before having a cigarette or vaping,
  - when hands are dirty,
  - after toilet use.
- Avoid touching their eyes, mouth, or nose.
- Do not share objects that touch their mouth, for example, bottles or cups.
- Use their own pens.

Respiratory hygiene

In addition to hand hygiene, good respiratory hygiene and etiquette is also necessary.

Employees must:
- Adopt good respiratory hygiene and cough etiquette.
- Ensure you are familiar with and follow respiratory hygiene guidance.

Physical distancing

Physical distancing is recommended to reduce the spread of infection. The current recommended distance to be maintained between people to minimise risk of transmission is 2 metres.

Physical distancing must be provided for across all work activities and this will be achieved in a number of ways:
- A no hand shaking policy should be implemented.
- Free office capacity should be used as much as is reasonably practicable and work organised in such a way that multiple occupancy of office premises is avoided and/or physical distances maintained.
- Breaks should be organised in such a way as to facilitate maintenance of physical distancing.
- Employees should be organised into teams who will consistently work and take breaks together. The teams should be as small as is reasonably practicable in the context of the work to be done.
- Meetings should be conducted as much as possible using online remote means. Where face to face meetings are absolutely necessary, the length of the meeting and the numbers attending should be kept to a minimum and participants must maintain physical distancing at all times.

Canteen facilities

For employers that offer canteen facilities at work the following needs to be adhered to:

- Close canteen facilities if public health measures including social distancing cannot be facilitated.
- Stagger canteen use and extend serving times.
- Implement a queue management system with correct distance markings to avoid queues at food counters, tray return points and checkouts.
- Put in place use of card payment methods where practicable.
- Provide one way systems for access/egress routes in the workplace where practicable.
- Adapt existing sign-in/sign-out measures and systems.
- Prevent gatherings of workers in the workplace at the beginning and end of working hours (such as at time recording terminals and in changing rooms, washrooms and showers).
- Implement physical distancing during any outdoor work activity. For outdoor work activities, facilities for frequent hand hygiene should be provided and should be located close to where workers are working.

Procedure if someone falls ill

While an employee should not attend work if displaying any symptoms of COVID-19, the following steps outline how employers should put in place a response plan in advance and also deal with a suspected case that may arise during the course of work.

- Include a defined response structure that identifies the team(s) responsible for responding to a suspected case in the COVID-19 response plan.
- Appoint an appropriate manager(s) for dealing with suspected cases.
- Identify a designated isolation area in advance. The designated area and the route to the designated area should be easily accessible and as far as is reasonable and practicable should be accessible by people with disabilities.
- Ensure the designated area has the ability to isolate the person behind a closed door.
- Provide as is reasonably practicable:
  - Ventilation, i.e. via a window,
  - Tissues, hand sanitiser, disinfectant and/or wipes,
  - PPE; gloves, masks,
  - Clinical waste bags.

If a worker displays symptoms of COVID-19 during work, the manager and the response team must:

- Isolate the worker and have a procedure in place to accompany the individual to the designated isolation area via the isolation route, keeping at least 2 metres away from the symptomatic person and also making sure that others maintain a distance of at least 2 metres from the symptomatic person at all times.
- Provide a mask for the person presenting with symptoms if one is available. The employee should wear the mask if in a common area with other people or while exiting the premises.
- Assess whether the unwell individual can immediately be directed to go home and call their doctor and continue self-isolation at home.

- Facilitate the person presenting with symptoms remaining in isolation if they cannot immediately go home and facilitate them calling their doctor. The employee should avoid touching people, surfaces and objects. Advice should be given to the person presenting with symptoms to cover their mouth and nose with the disposable tissue provided when they cough or sneeze and put the tissue in the waste bag provided.
- Arrange transport home or to hospital for medical assessment. Public transport of any kind should not be used.
- Carry out an assessment of the incident which will form part of determining follow-up actions and recovery.
- Arrange for appropriate cleaning of the isolation area and work areas involved.
- Provide advice and assistance if contacted by the HSE.

Additional advice on dealing with a suspected case is available from the NSAI:
https://www.nsai.ie/images/uploads/general/NSAI-Guidelines-for-COVID-19-2020-04-09.pdf

The best way to prevent person-to-person spread of COVID-19 is to use proper hand hygiene and respiratory etiquette and practice physical distancing.

Travel to the workplace and business travel
- Wherever possible employees should travel to work alone using their own transport.
- Business trips and face-to-face interactions should be reduced to the absolute minimum and, as far as is reasonably practicable, technological alternatives should be used.
- For necessary work-related trips, the use of the same vehicles by multiple employees is not encouraged. The number of employees who share a vehicle – simultaneously or consecutively – should be kept to a minimum as far is as reasonably practicable.

Meetings
Face-to-face meetings should be reduced to the absolute minimum and, as far as is reasonably practicable, technological alternatives should be used. If a face-to- face meeting is necessitated the only necessary meeting participants should attend, attendees should be two metres apart from each other and rooms should be well ventilated/windows opened to allow fresh air circulation.

Eating arrangements
With cafés and restaurants closed across the country, a means of heating food and making hot drinks should be provided for should be introduced. Where possible employees should be encouraged to stay on site once they have entered the workplace.
- Break times should be staggered to reduce contact.
- If possible, employees should bring pre-prepared meals and refillable drinking bottles from home.
- Employees should sit 2 metres apart from each other whilst eating and avoid all contact.
- Crockery, eating utensils, cups etc. should not be used.
- All rubbish should be put straight in the bin and not left for someone else to clear up.

- All areas used for eating must be thoroughly cleaned at the end of each break, including chairs, door handles, etc.

Cleaning

Enhanced cleaning procedures should be in place across the workplace, particularly in communal areas and at touch points including:

- Taps and washing facilities,
- Toilet flush and seats,
- Door handles and push plates,
- Food preparation and eating surfaces,
- Telephone equipment
- Keyboards, photocopiers and other office equipment,

Rubbish collection and storage points should be increased and emptied regularly throughout and at the end of each day.

Mental health and wellbeing

Employees who are returning to the workplace after a period of isolation may have concerns about the risk of infection or changes to their job due to the implementation of measures to prevent the spread of COVID-19.   In that context:

- Employers should ensure workers are made aware of, and have access to, any business provided Employee Assistance Programmes or Occupational Health services.
- A range of supports and advice is available from the Health and Safety Authority ('HSA') on work related stress at: https://www.hsa.ie/eng/Topics/Workplace_Stress/
- The HSA also provides a free online risk assessment tool for addressing work related stress: www.workpositive.ie
- The Government's "In This Together Campaign" also provides information on minding one's mental health as well as tips on staying active and connected: https://www.gov.ie/en/campaigns/together/?referrer=/together/

General principles

- Stairs should be used in preference to lifts to minimise close proximity.
- If masks are worn, they should be clean, and they should not be shared or handled by other colleagues.