



Health and Safety Committee

Notes for members, reps, chapels and branches

March 2020

Coronavirus/Covid 19

Journalists deployed to cover coronavirus (Covid 19) stories – as reporters or doing comms and PR work – should ensure the risks are appropriately assessed and employers have reasonable precautions in place.

Freelances should assess the risks for themselves, using the questions here and adopting as many precautions as are reasonable, to limit any risks that they may become infected and that, if (unknowingly) infected, they could pass Covid 19 to others.

UK Department of Health and Social Care and Public Health England guidance shows where risks exist¹. Enough is known about Covid 19 for the hazards to be “reasonably foreseeable”. Therefore each should be risk assessed so that legally required reasonable precautions can be put in place.

While some specific characteristics of Covid 19 had not, by early March 2020, been established, other factors were sufficiently well documented for the risks to be managed and minimised.

Covid 19 is primarily transmitted from one person to another by airborne particles over distances of less than two (2) metres and by transfer from hard surfaces to the hands and then to the mouth, nose and eyes. Therefore, changes to behaviour can greatly reduce the likelihood of infection.

As a biological agent, Covid 19 is covered by the Control of Substances Hazards to Health (COSHH) regulations. While COSHH does not cover respiratory infections passed between co-workers, employers still face liabilities if workers are exposed to infection risks from visitors to their premises or when work is carried out anywhere they *could* encounter others with the infection (even outside the UK). However, Covid 19 is also passed on after touching contaminated hard surfaces.

In the Republic of Ireland, the Health and Safety Authority has published an overview of regulations covering biological agents².

Risk assessments

The UK Government says airborne transmission is greatly reduced by keeping a distance of about two

(2) metres between people, thus eliminating the need for masks. This may be probably impractical in most places of work but good airflow through buildings should also reduce infection risks.

However, Covid 19 can attach itself to the skin (of the hands) and enter the body through the (mucous membranes of) the eyes, nose and mouth.

Factors affecting the survival and “viability” of any virus include the nature of surfaces, exposure to (sun or ultra-violet) light, humidity, temperature and chemicals that can destroy the virus (by killing the fats, proteins and sugars that form its coating). Covid 19 infection from soft surfaces, such as fabrics, appears rare.

By March 8, 2020, the UK government was still saying that: “Under most circumstances, the amount of infectious virus on any contaminated surfaces is likely to have decreased significantly (after) 72 hours.”

COSHH risk assessments (RAs) must specifically consider those who may be additionally vulnerable because their immune systems are in some way compromised. They include pregnant women, those on immuno-suppressant medications or who have medical conditions that can affect immunity.

Therefore, RAs should consider:

- Airborne infection – from visitors or others encountered during work;
- Hard surfaces – and transfer to the hands – wherever work is taking place or who is involved.

So RAs need to identify:

- Who is at risk?
- Where are they at risk? (Who nearby may already be infected and contagious? How is someone at risk? What are they doing to put themselves at risk?)

RAs should always be “suitable and sufficient”, carried out by management and available on request to reps and workers (within a reasonable time).

Reasonable precautions

These may include:

- deciding who is deployed where and why, which may include home working arrangements³;
- ensuring work stations are far enough apart;
- ensuring washing facilities are easily available or workers have access such facilities wherever they work;

¹ www.gov.uk/guidance/wuhan-novel-coronavirus-information-for-the-public

² www.hsa.ie/eng/Topics/Biological_Agents/Legislation/Relevant_Legislation/

³ The NUJ has produced separate guidance on home and lone working. Contact a union official to ask for the pdfs from the Headland House server.

- Alcohol “wipes” are provided or available wherever work is carried out (and wherever people may touch or shake hands);
- providing cleaning gel (of at least 60 per cent alcohol) wherever people may touch one another;
- ensuring all indoor areas are adequately ventilated (to lessen infection risks by dispersing any airborne particles or droplets);
- trying to reduce or eliminate the need for work travel;
- ensuring (work) surfaces are cleaned regularly, especially where “hot desking” is involved.

Individuals should protect themselves – and others around them – by making sure they:

- Do not sneeze or cough over others (by keeping at least two metres between themselves and others and using handkerchiefs or tissues that are then disposed off and destroyed safely).
- Keep hands as clean as possible, washing them with soap and water for at least 20 seconds or cleaning gels or wipes (with at least 60 per cent alcohol), getting between the fingers and then trying not to touch their faces. Frequent face washing helps too.
- Clean and disinfect frequently touched objects and surfaces, especially phones, keyboards and mice.

UK Government information implies – but did not (by mid-March 2020) specifically state – that Covid 19 is less easily transferred from fabric to the hands than hard materials or surfaces.

Freelances should consider the probability of encountering someone with Covid 19 at public events and being where infection may occur against the practicalities of making sure they take reasonable precautions to protect themselves.

They should also approach regular clients to try to make arrangements for access to corporate computer systems for home working (taking data security and other health and safety risks into account) if managers deem this necessary or they request such facilities in order to protect others.

Those working regular or booked shifts should approach those who hired them and establish, in writing, that they will still be paid if they are denied access to an employers’ premises or computer systems preventing from doing such work once it has been confirmed (again in writing).

Those using cameras and audio recorders may wish to consider cleaning such equipment with alcohol wipes after use and, in terms of audio recording, using equipment that functions adequately with a distance of at least two metres between any two people (when carrying out interviews).

What reps can do

Reps in organisations where the union is recognised should ask managers for copies of the risk assessments and seek to ensure they are suitable and sufficient, in line with the Health and Safety at Work Act 1974.

They should also remind managers that it is never in an organisation’s interests for people with airborne infections to be anywhere they could potentially infect others (and increase sickness absence) – and that adequate arrangements should be made for all appropriate workers (including freelances) to have access to the computer systems that would allow them to work from home.

Managers should also be reminded of the need to be able to arrange appropriate cover for any worker, be they staff or freelance, at very short notice in the event of any infection scare or uncertainty. Adequate “work at home” arrangements should be negotiated.

Reps can also carry out inspections to ensure that reasonable precautions are in place. Managers should be notified when inspections are planned so they can be present when they take place. Health and safety reps can carry out inspections in work time.

Any encounters or “near misses” should be recorded in incident books and reviewed regularly. Risk assessments and reasonable precautions should be updated to reflect the findings of such reviews.

Safety committees should also ensure that Covid 19 risk assessments and reasonable precautions are reviewed as more information about the nature of the virus becomes available.

Additionally, reps should work with managers to ensure all (UK) staff are know they can claim statutory sick pay(SSP) from day one and how this is done. In the budget on March 11, the UK government did not extend SSP to freelances. Instead, the chancellor directed freelances towards applying for Universal Credit without any indication of how long claims might take to process.

Feeling ill?

If you feel you may have been exposed to Covid 19 or you are unwell, you should contact your line manager and appropriate health services – such as dialling NHS 111 in the UK – for testing and advice.

Guidance for employers about sending staff home is available on relevant government websites.

Further information

For the UK:

www.gov.uk/government/publications/guidance-to-employers-and-businesses-about-covid-19/guidance-for-employers-and-businesses-on-covid-19

For the Republic of Ireland

www.hsa.ie/eng/Topics/Biological_Agents/Biological_Agents_Introduction/Classification_of_Biological_Agents/