

Guidance for workplaces in the COVID-19 pandemic

Version 2

Success in controlling the COVID-19 pandemic depends on the full cooperation of all sectors of society – including businesses and employers – who play an essential role in curbing the spread of this disease, whilst continuing to provide their services to the community. Public Health Authorities will support business continuity while coordinating action in the COVID-19 pandemic.

Recognising that the COVID-19 pandemic is a public health emergency and that business continuity in respect of COVID-19 should be founded in expert health advice and in social dialogue, the following principles shall apply:

- ✓ All workers, regardless of their occupation or how they are engaged, have the right to a healthy and safe working environment.
- ✓ The COVID-19 pandemic requires a uniquely focused approach to work health and safety as it applies to businesses, workers and others in the workplace.
- ✓ To keep our workplaces healthy and safe, businesses must, in consultation with workers, and their representatives, assess the way they work to identify, understand and quantify risks and to implement and review control measures to address those risks.
- ✓ As COVID-19 restrictions are gradually relaxed, businesses, workers and other duty holders must work together to adapt and promote safe work practices, consistent with advice from health authorities, to ensure their workplaces are ready for the social distancing and exemplary hygiene measures that will be an important part of the transition.
- ✓ Businesses and workers must actively control against the transmission of COVID-19 while at work, consistent with the updated advice from the Public Health Authorities.
- ✓ Businesses and workers must prepare for the possibility that there will be cases of COVID-19 in the workplace and be ready to respond immediately, appropriately, effectively and efficiently, and consistent with specific recommendations from health authorities.

How COVID-19 spreads

COVID-19 presents with coughing or sneezing which release droplets of infected fluid. Most of these droplets can fall on nearby surfaces and objects - such as

desks, tables, machinery or telephones. People can catch COVID-19 by touching contaminated surfaces or objects – and then touching their eyes, nose or mouth. Standing within two metres of a person with COVID-19 for a prolonged period of time, one can catch the disease by breathing in droplets coughed out or exhaled by them.

In other words, COVID-19 spreads in a similar way to flu. Most persons infected with COVID-19 experience mild symptoms and recover. However, some go on to experience more serious illness and may require hospital care. Risk of serious illness rises with age. People with weakened immune systems and people with conditions such as diabetes, heart and lung disease are also more vulnerable to serious illness.

Keeping workers safe and limiting the spread of COVID-19

Employers should be doing the following at their workplace:

- ✓ **allow workers to work from home, where possible**
- ✓ ensure physical distancing by keeping a distance of at least 2 metres between people
- ✓ encourage all workers to frequently wash their hands for at least 20 seconds with soap and water or by using an alcohol-based hand sanitiser and to practise good hygiene.
- ✓ be aware of how to spot COVID-19 symptoms (fever, cough, sore throat, shortness of breath, headaches, tiredness, muscle pain, loss of taste, loss of smell and diarrhoea) and make sure workers do not come to work if they are unwell
- ✓ make sure your workplace is regularly cleaned and disinfected
- ✓ have signs and posters around the workplace to remind workers and others of the risks of COVID-19 and the measures that are necessary to stop its spread.

Social distancing at the workplace

If you can, work from home. If you cannot work from home and you are sick, you must not attend your workplace. You must stay at home and away from others

Steps for social distancing in the workplace include:

- ✓ stop shaking hands to greet others
- ✓ cancel non-essential meetings
- ✓ hold meetings via video conferencing or phone call

- ✓ put off large meetings to a later date
- ✓ hold essential meetings outside in the open air if possible
- ✓ promote good hand, sneeze and cough hygiene
- ✓ provide alcohol-based hand rub for all staff
- ✓ eat lunch at your desk or outside
- ✓ close down the lunchroom / staff canteen
- ✓ regularly clean and disinfect surfaces that many people touch
- ✓ open windows or adjust air conditioning for more ventilation
- ✓ limit food handling and sharing of food in the workplace

Make sure your workplace is clean and hygienic

Contamination on surfaces touched by employees and customers is one of the main ways that COVID-19 spreads.

- ✓ Surfaces (e.g. desks and tables) and objects (e.g. machinery, equipment, telephones, keyboards) need to be wiped with disinfectant regularly.
- ✓ Promote regular and thorough handwashing by employees, contractors, suppliers and customers. Make sure they have access to places where they can wash their hands with soap and water.
- ✓ Place dispensers of sanitizing hand rub (70% alcohol) in prominent places around the workplace, accessible to all workers and customers. Make sure these dispensers are regularly refilled.
- ✓ Download and display posters on Covid19 promoting handwashing from www.covid19health.gov.mt
- ✓ Combine this with other communication measures including guidance from occupational health and safety officers
- ✓ Request assistance from Public Health authorities if necessary

Why? Because hand washing and alcohol sanitization kill the virus on your hands and prevent the spread of COVID-19

Promote good respiratory hygiene

Good respiratory hygiene prevents the spread of COVID-19.

- ✓ Employees, contractors and customers anyone with even a mild cough or fever (37 C or more) need to stay at home.

- ✓ Keep communicating and promoting the message that people need to stay at home even if they have just mild symptoms and to return to work 24 hours only after they are symptom free
- ✓ Display posters with this message in your workplaces. Please contact the Health Promotion and Disease Prevention Directorate on 2326600 or visit www.covid19health.gov.mt. Combine this with other communication channels commonly used in your organization or business.
- ✓ Persons who develop a mild cough, fever (i.e. a temperature of more than 37 C), shortness of breath, headaches, tiredness, loss of taste, loss of smell or diarrhoea, should call the public health helpline on 111 giving details of their symptoms.

Getting your business and workplace ready to operate with community spread of COVID-19

If an employee becomes ill with COVID-19 in the workplace

- ✓ Develop a plan of what to do if someone becomes ill with COVID-19 at your workplace.
- ✓ Identify persons who may be at risk, and support them, without inviting stigma and discrimination into your workplace. This could include pregnant women and staff who have conditions that put them at higher risk of serious illness (e.g. diabetes, heart and lung disease, older age).
- ✓ Review your operational procedures and continue to promote regular teleworking across your organization. Teleworking will help your business continue operating while your employees stay safe. This measure allows you to continue to utilise the skills and competences of vulnerable staff members.
- ✓ Treat personal information about individual workers' health carefully, in line with privacy laws.

If there is an outbreak of COVID-19 in the workplace

- ✓ Develop a contingency and business continuity plan for an outbreak. The plan will help prepare your organization for the possibility of an outbreak of COVID-19.
- ✓ The plan should address how to keep your business running if a significant number of employees, contractors and suppliers cannot come to your place of business - either because they are on obligatory quarantine or because they are ill.
- ✓ Communicate with your employees and contractors about the business continuity plan. Make sure they are aware of what they need to do – or not

do – under the plan. Emphasize key points such as the importance of staying away from work even if they have only mild symptoms or have had to take simple medications (e.g. paracetamol, ibuprofen) which may mask the symptoms.

- ✓ Be sure your plan addresses the mental health and social consequences of a case of COVID-19 in the workplace and offer information and support.

Tips for managing stress from COVID-19

- ✓ Regularly ask your workers how they are getting along and if anything is stressing them.
- ✓ Where workers are distressed about the challenging conditions caused by the pandemic, acknowledge their feelings about the situation and re-assure workers they are doing what they can in the circumstances.
- ✓ Stay informed with information from official sources and regularly communicate or share this information with workers.
- ✓ Evaluate with your workers and their representatives any risks to their psychological health and physical health and safety.
- ✓ Address the psychosocial risks where you reasonably can.
- ✓ Provide workers with a point of contact to discuss their concerns.
- ✓ proactively support workers who you identify may be more at risk of workplace psychological injury particularly frontline workers. Remember those working from home.
- ✓ Refer workers to appropriate mental health and wellbeing support services, such as Helpline 1770 (for everyone) or the Employee Support Program (for public administration employees)

Remember:

Simple precautions and planning can make a big difference.

Help protect your employees and your business.

Remember the 3Cs: Clean, Cover Contain.

Respiratory hygiene, hand washing and social distancing.

How to stay informed: www.covid19health.gov.mt