

WORKPLACE HEALTHY & SAFETY: COVID-19 WORKPLACE PRACTICE REVIEW



WORKPLACE HEALTH AND SAFETY – TIME TO REVIEW COVID-19 WORKPLACE PRACTICES

Employers have legal obligations to ensure steps are taken to eliminate or minimise workplace health and safety risks to workers. With our essential industry still operating, and although government and health departments are giving promising signals that Australia is showing the signs of ‘flattening the curve’, now is the time for members to stay vigilant. Revisiting your current plans require that you ask a lot of questions and involve everyone.

REVIEW CURRENT PRACTICES

Businesses should regularly be reviewing COVID-19 workplace protocols and practices that have been implemented. There are a range of questions to consider, including:

- > Is communication with workers being undertaken appropriately and often enough?
- > Are there appropriate emergency measures in place?
- > Is adequate signage and notifications in place?
- > Are those practices proving to be effective or can they be improved?
- > Do workers know who to speak with if they have concerns, and who is the backup point of contact?
- > Are there additional control measures that should be in place?

The RMC strongly recommends members consult with workers and make them part of the review process. Remind employees they also have legal responsibilities to take reasonable care of their own health and safety, as well as others around them. Ask for their input and whether there is room for improvement in current practices. If there are gaps, they are the people best placed to make suggestions for improvement and establish appropriate solutions.

REINFORCE WORKPLACE HYGIENE PRACTICES

Now is the time to ensure managers and supervisors reinforce the workplace hygiene practices that you have in place as some areas are reporting COVID-19 complacency. Consider:

- > Are workplace cleaning, hygiene and physical distancing practices working well?
- > Are workers becoming complacent and need reminders and encouragement more often, how can you remind them of the importance?

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- > Are hand sanitisation stations well equipped and topped up often enough during the day?
- > Are your signage and directional instructions in need of a refresh?

HANDLING COVID-19 WORKPLACE INCIDENTS

Consider the appropriateness of your protocols if a worker presents with COVID-19 symptoms. They may be at work when this occurs or may report in ill. Members have a lot of committed workers so periodically reiterate (i.e. direct them) not to attend work if they feel unwell and to seek immediate medical advice. Consider:

- > Are there processes in place for assisting a worker who has suspected or been confirmed to have caught COVID-19 to leave the premises and seek immediate medical advice?
- > Who will assist that worker to egress the premises and is there appropriate PPE, such as gloves and masks?
- > Do you have protocols for informing co-workers about possible exposure to a suspected or confirmed case of COVID-19, but maintains confidentiality?
- > Although there is no automatic requirement to close down an entire workplace if the worker is infected, or suspected to be infected, is there an appropriate sanitisation process in place if this occurs?
- > Does the process cover the area where the worker was working and all places they have been, or the entire premises?
- > Do you need to evacuate the area or premises while sanitisation is being undertaken?
- > Who is required to undertake that sanitisation and are they supplied with appropriate PPE?

Taking the appropriate steps and periodically revisiting them will minimise the likelihood of this unwelcome visitor turning up and spreading through the workplace.

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WORKPLACE HEALTH AND SAFETY – COVID-19 INCIDENT NOTIFICATION

If there is an incident of COVID-19 in the workplace, each state and territory have their own laws and obligations for reporting related incidents. See below a basic overview of those obligations in each jurisdiction.

Victoria

Employers must notify WorkSafe Victoria when they become aware of a case of COVID-19 where it is the cause (or suspected causes) of a death at a workplace. WorkSafe Victoria can be found: <https://www.worksafe.vic.gov.au/resources/guide-incident-notification>

New South Wales

Employers must notify SafeWork NSW of a case of COVID-19 arising out of the conduct of the business or undertaking that requires the person to have immediate treatment as an in-patient in a hospital, and any confirmed infection to which the carrying out of work is a significant contributing factor. Notification can be made by calling SafeWork NSW on 13 10 50.

Queensland

Currently, Queensland Health will be notified by the medical professional who confirms the diagnosis. WHS Queensland will not enforce any legislative requirement for workplaces to separately notify WHSQ. If an employee has been attending work and is confirmed to have COVID-19, you are obliged to contact Queensland Health - 13 432 584 - and seek guidance on handling possible workplace exposure to other workers.

Western Australia

Employers must notify a case of COVID-19 to the Department of Mines, Industry Regulation and Safety, WorkSafe where it is the cause (or suspected causes) of a death at a workplace. Employers are not required to notify non-fatal incidents of COVID-19 to the Department of Mines, Industry Regulation and Safety – WorkSafe, as WA Health are already notified of confirmed cases by medical practitioners. Notification is made by calling WA WorkSafe on 1800 678 198.

South Australia

Employers are required to notify a case of COVID-19 to SafeWork SA, if the case can be reliably attributed to a workplace exposure, and either results in treatment by a doctor within 48 hours of exposure to a substance (e.g. airborne contaminants, human substances), or death. Notification can be made by calling SafeWork on 1300 365 255.

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Tasmania

Employers must notify WorkSafe Tasmania when it is confirmed that a person has contracted COVID-19 through carrying out work and/or the person dies or the person is required to have treatment as an in-patient in a hospital or the reason the person contracted COVID-19 is reliably attributable to carrying out work. Notification must be made immediately after the employer becomes aware of the incident. Call WorkSafe Tasmania on 1300 366 322.

Australian Capital Territory

Employers should notify WorkSafe ACT if it is suspected that a person may have contracted COVID-19 and requires treatment in hospital or meets the prescribed serious illnesses from within the workplace. Notification must be made immediately after the employer becomes aware of the incident. Notification can be made by calling the ACT Government call centre on 13 22 81.

Northern Territory

Employers should notify NT WorkSafe where a person dies from COVID-19 and the infection arises out of the conduct of the business or undertaking a person requires immediate treatment as an in-patient in a hospital for COVID-19 and the infection arises out of the conduct of the business or undertaking. Notification is made by calling NT WorkSafe on 1800 019 115.

IN CLOSING

Even if there is no immediate requirement to report an incident of COVID-19 in the workplace, ensuring you handle the incident appropriately is an imperative. Further, given COVID-19 can become a workplace risk and hazard, we strongly recommend members keep records of what occurred and what action was taken at the time and after. As always treat affected workers with empathy and consideration.

Should you have any queries about COVID-19 related WHS issues or notification requirements during this time please feel free to contact Charles Watson to discuss on 0428 568 032 or via email charles@thermc.com.au.