



CORONAVIRUS (COVID-19) and Health Workers

Health workers are often at the front line of caring for people infected with infectious disease such as COVID-19 and so can be at high risk of infection. Here is information about the virus, as well as steps you can take to prevent its spread in health workplaces. The 2019 novel coronavirus or SARS-CoV-2 is a new respiratory virus that has not been identified before; and thus people have no immunity to it. The virus causes diseases of varying severities ranging from mild (e.g. similar to common cold) to severe (e.g. pneumonia).

TRANSMISSION



- ▶ Person-to-person **contact** or touching contaminated surfaces
- ▶ Likely spread via respiratory **droplets** within a distance of two meters (1-2m) through coughing and sneezing
- ▶ Estimated incubation period is between 2-14 days

Common sequence to acquire COVID – 19

Source – You must be in direct contact with an infected individual or contaminated material

Inoculation – There must be an inoculation process from the source to the recipient e.g. touching your face with contaminated hands.

COMMON SYMPTOMS



Cough



Fever



Shortness of breath



Sore throat



Headache

Other symptoms include:
Body aches and pains
Weakness or fatigue
Severe respiratory distress

IDENTIFYING POTENTIAL SOURCES

Employers should:

- Have a workplace policy and procedure and ensure workers are familiar with it.
- The policy should include medical management procedures to address COVID-19 in the workplace.
- Communicate and make available a platform for workers to access the latest policy and relevant information around COVID-19.
- Identify exposure risks for different categories of workers and implement appropriate control measures.
- Determine if workers could be exposed to virus activities or materials where the virus may be encountered.
- Review HR policies around business travel, sick leave, and other related policies to account for COVID-19.

W-O-R-K-E-R-S RESPONSIBILITIES

Wash hands regularly using soap and water (~20 sec) or alcohol-based hand rub (~70%)

Obey health and safety policies and procedures

Remember to cover nose & mouth with a flexed elbow/ tissue when coughing & sneezing

Key is to avoid exposure and also refrain from exposing others to potential risks

Ensure you don, doff and dispose of personal protective equipment properly

Report any situation likely to present a potential or serious danger to life or health

Self-monitor for signs of illness and self-isolate or report illness to managers, if it occurs



Source: Shutterstock (procured image)



Different workers have different risk exposures:
Based on job specific risk assessments, consider the following:

- A risk assessment should be conducted in the workplace to determine the RISK of EXPOSURE to COVID-19 and be communicated to all workers.
- The appropriate PPE should be used alongside ENGINEERING and ADMINISTRATIVE controls within the health care setting.

Additional hazards for health workers involved in caring for potentially infected patients include exposure to long working hours, psychological distress, fatigue, occupational burnout, stigma, physical and psychological violence. All of these hazards also need to be mitigated as part of the prevention and control plan.

Personal Protective Equipment (PPE):

- PPE is an effective measure within a complete package of mitigation and control strategies.
- It is important to use PPE adequately in order to optimise the PPE available to HWs.
- Health care workers involved in the direct care of patients should use; depending on risk assessment: gown, gloves, medical mask and eye protection (eye goggles or face shield).
- Health care workers involved in aerosol generating procedures (e.g. tracheal intubation, non-invasive ventilation, cardiopulmonary resuscitation, tracheostomy, bronchoscopy) should use, depending on the risk assessment: respirators, eye protection, gloves, gowns and aprons if the gowns are not fluid resistant.
- N95 respirators can be used and should be fitted.
- All healthcare workers should with appropriate PPE according to the setting and task that they are doing. The WHO guidance on appropriate PPE use is found in https://apps.who.int/iris/bitstream/handle/10665/331215/WHO-2019-nCov-IPCPE_use-2020.1-eng.pdf
- Surgical masks should be available for patients with respiratory symptoms that are being cared for in the community.
- It is not recommended for asymptomatic individuals to wear a respiratory mask of any type.

Administrative Controls:

Should be in place and communicated to employees and managers which includes:

- ▶▶ A workplace plan of action for preparedness
- ▶▶ Clear infection prevention and control and occupational health policies
- ▶▶ Controlled access to high risk areas and laboratories
- ▶▶ Appropriate and rapid triage and proper patient placement
- ▶▶ Adequate staff to patient ratios, appropriate working hours and breaks need to be maintained
- ▶▶ The employer needs to provide information and training on:
 - Infection prevention and control including hand and respiratory hygiene practices
 - Correct donning and doffing and disposal of PPE
 - Advise workers on self-assessment, symptom reporting and sick leave policies
 - Influenza vaccinations to prevent possible co infection with influenza
- ▶▶ Ensure proper signage and risk communication to staff and visitors to health facilities.
- ▶▶ Routine cleaning and disinfection procedures (e.g. pre-clean surfaces prior to applying hospital-grade disinfectant to frequently touched surfaces or objects as indicated on the product’s label)
- ▶▶ The occupational health or infection control personnel should establish points of contact between the organisation, personnel and local health authority
- ▶▶ Established public health reporting procedures should be swiftly followed
- ▶▶ A blame free working environment needs to be provided to allow employees the ease of reporting of symptoms
- ▶▶ Establish and ensure workers have access to employee assistance programmes

Engineering controls:

- ▶▶ Ensuring adequate space of at least 1 metre between patients and HW’s.
- ▶▶ Well ventilated isolation rooms for patients suspected or confirmed to be infected with COVID-19.
- ▶▶ Physical barriers such as glass windows or plastic

What to do if you suspect you have been exposed to COVID-19

- ▶▶ Alert your supervisor and occupational health clinic immediately.
- ▶▶ If you are experiencing symptoms, inform your health care provider about any contacts and recent travel to areas affected by COVID-19.

Vaccinations

There are currently no vaccines for COVID-19 however, it is advisable to take the flu vaccine to prevent influenza and unnecessary testing for COVID-19

For more information, contact

NICD: 080 002 9999

www.nicd.ac.za or www.nioh.ac.za

