NATIONAL HEALTH LABORATORY SERVICE

C🦠RONAVIRUS (COVID-19) IN THE WORKPLACE

Corona viruses can cause mild (e.g. similar to common cold) to more severe disease (e.g. MERS - Middle East Respiratory Syndrome and SARS – Severe Acute Respiratory Syndrome). A new coronavirus disease emerged in Wuhan, China in December 2019 and is called COVID-19.

The World Health Organization (WHO) work closely with world experts, governments and partners to rapidly expand scientific knowledge on COVID-19 as much still needs to be learnt as the outbreak investigations continue. Timely advice on measures to protect worker's health and prevent the spread of the outbreak will be provided.

WORKERS' RISK, RIGHTS, ROLES, RESPONSIBILITIES

TRANSMISSION

▶▶ Person-to-person **contact** or touching contaminated surfaces
▶▶ Likely spread via respiratory **droplets** within a distance of two meters (2m) through coughing

COMMON SYMPTOMS

- Cough
- Fever — 38°C
- Shortness of breath
- Sore throat
- Headache

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

IDENTIFYING POTENTIAL SOURCES

Employers should:

- identify exposure risks for workers and implement appropriate control measures.
- consider if their workers were in contact with COVID-19 suspects while on duty.
- determine if workers could be exposed to areas (e.g. worksites) or materials (e.g. laboratory samples, waste) contaminated with the virus.
- Identify sick individuals and screen for signs and symptoms, and/or a history of travel to COVID-19-affected areas.

WORKERS AT RISK OF INFECTION

Although every person may be at risk of exposure to COVID-19, the risk is higher for workers interacting with persons that may be potentially infected. Immunocompromised workers are at higher risk of infection (e.g. pre-existing conditions such as asthma, diabetes and heart disease). High exposure risk group workers include:

- **Airline operations** (e.g. airline cabin crew, aircraft cleaners, mechanics)
- **Boarder control** (e.g. security officials, and other boarder officials)
- **Health care** (e.g. paramedics, nurses, doctors, other medical staff)
- **Laboratories** (e.g. medical technologists, scientists, laboratory aids and researchers)
- **Pathology and funeral services** (e.g. mortuary attendants, autopsy technicians and funeral directors)
- **Solid waste and wastewater management** (e.g. waste pickers, water treatment plant

DO YOU SUSPECT YOU HAVE BEEN EXPOSED TO COVID-19

▶▶ Alert your supervisor or occupational health clinic immediately.

▶▶ If you are experiencing symptoms, inform your healthcare provider about any contacts and recent travel to areas affected by COVID-19.

HOW IS COVID -19 DIAGNOSED?

If your healthcare provider suspects you may have COVID-19, then a laboratory test would be required (nasopharyngeal or oropharyngeal swabs, sputum, tracheal aspirate). The National Institute for Communicable diseases (NICD) should be contacted for further information. The NICD's webpage (www.nicd.ac.za) provides detailed information and guidelines for collecting, handling, and transporting clinical specimens from patients under investigation (PUI) to their laboratory. Or contact them on the hotlines (public: 080 002 9999) or (healthcare workers: 082 883 9920).

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

W ash hands regularly using soap and water for 20 sec or alcohol-based hand sanitiser (~70%)

O bey health and safety policies and procedures

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

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

E nsure you don, doff and dispose of personal protective equipment properly

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

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

WORKERS RIGHTS

Prevention & control of workplace exposure to COVID-19

A **risk assessment** should be conducted in the workplace to determine the **RISK of EXPOSURE** to COVID-19 and communicated to all workers.

Administrative Controls

- Every employer must have a workplace plan of action in place for preparedness.
- The occupational health or infection control personnel should establish points of contact between the organisation, personnel and local health facility.
- Workers potentially infected with COVID-19 must be isolated immediately.
- Restrict number of personnel entering isolation areas with suspected or confirmed COVID-19 cases (e.g. healthcare facilities).
- Established public health reporting procedures should be swiftly followed.
- Airborne precautions should apply for high risk procedures (e.g. nebulising, suctioning).
- Avoid use of compressed air or water sprays to clean potentially contaminated surfaces, as these may aerosolise infectious materials.

Environmental & Engineering Controls

- Isolation rooms are recommended for COVID-19 (e.g. healthcare facilities)
- Alcohol based solutions (70% ethanol) must be used for surface decontamination
- Surface cleaning devices are recommended (e.g. UVGI)

Workers' rights include that employers and managers:

- ensure that all preventive and protective measures are taken to minimize risks, including provision of adequate PPE supplies.
- provide continuous awareness, education and training of workers on anticipated occupational exposure to COVID-19.
- create a culture whereby workers can report freely without being stigmatised.
- advise and encourage workers on self-assessment, symptom reporting and staying home when ill.
- allow workers to exercise the right to withdraw from work activities, that they have reasonable justification to believe presents a serious danger to their life or health.
- Report to the compensation commissioner if work-related.

Personal Protective Equipment

- Limit the spread of infectious respiratory secretions by wearing a facemask
- Personnel must wear protective gloves for patient caring and cleaning contaminated surfaces
- Respirators (e.g. N95) are only for aerosol generating procedures (e.g. nebulisers) unless informed otherwise by WHO
- Contact and droplet precautions include wearing clean protective clothing to avoid contamination

REFERENCES

1. https://www.who.int/docs/default-source/coronaviruse/who-rights-roles-respon-hw-covid-19.pdf?sfvrsn=bcabd401_0
2. https://www.osha.gov/SLTC/covid-19/
3. https://www.paho.org/hq/index.php?option=com_content&view=article&id=15696:coronavirus-disease-covid-19&Itemid=4206&lang=en
4. https://www.worldometers.info/coronavirus/

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For more information, contact
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The outbreak information is changing rapidly, hence the information is correct to date of publishing (01/04/2020).