

COVID-19: Back to the workplace

Adapting workplaces and protecting workers

Introduction

Most Member States of the European Union (EU) have put in place physical distancing measures as part of their [non-pharmaceutical countermeasures](#) to reduce transmission at workplaces of the novel coronavirus Sars-CoV-2 causing the COVID-19 disease, which include suspension of non-essential work activities. The nature and extent of the restrictions differ between Member States and sectors, but a substantial proportion of workers either have to work from home, or if their work cannot be performed at a distance, they stay at home often under an income replacement arrangement.

Once the physical distancing measures achieve a sufficient reduction in COVID-19 transmission rates, a gradual resumption of work activities is expected. This is likely to be done stepwise, with more essential work authorised first and work that can be done effectively while working from home last. However, regardless of how and to what extent normal work activities resume, it is highly likely that some measures will remain in place for some time to avoid a steep increase in infection rates ([COVID-19: guidance for the workplace](#)). [Furthermore, it is possible that an increase in infections at some point in the future will require a reintroduction of restrictive measures in some cases.]

The COVID-19 crisis is putting pressure on employers and workers, whether they had to implement new procedures and practices in a very short time, or to suspend their work and business activities. Occupational safety and health offers practical support for coming back to the workplace: appropriate preventive measures can ensure a safe and healthy return to work following relaxation of physical distancing measures, and also contribute to suppressing transmission of COVID-19.

These guidelines include general measures aiming to help employers achieve an appropriate safe and healthy work environment when resuming activities. A list of resources from various providers that target different industries and jobs is also included at the end of this document. Please note that for the information in this guidance does not cover the healthcare setting, for which specific advice is available (e.g. from [ECDC](#), [WHO](#), [CDC](#)).

Update your risk assessment

Just as under normal working conditions, the identification and [assessment of risks](#) is the starting point for managing occupational safety and health (OSH) under COVID-19 measures. Employers are obliged to revise their risk assessment when there is a change to the work process. Below are some examples of COVID-19 related issues to consider when undertaking such a revision.

Minimising exposure to COVID-19 at work

The implementation of safe work practices to limit exposure to COVID-19 at work requires first assessing the risks, and then implementing the [hierarchy of controls](#). This means putting in place control measures to first eliminate the risk and if this is not possible, minimise worker exposure. Below are some examples of control measures, however, not all of them will be applicable to all workplaces or jobs due to their nature.

- Carry out only essential work for the time being; it may be possible to postpone some work to when the risk is lower. If possible, deliver services remotely (phone or video)

instead of in person. Ensure that only workers who are essential to the job are present at the workplace.

- Reduce, as far as possible, contact between workers (e.g. during meetings or during breaks). Isolate workers who can carry out their tasks alone safely and who do not require specialised equipment or machinery that cannot be moved from the factory floor. For example, they could work alone in a spare office, staff room, canteen, or meeting room.
- Eliminate if possible, or limit, physical interaction with and between customers. For example, through online or phone orders, contactless delivery or managed entry (while also avoiding crowding outside), and physical distancing both inside and outside the premises.
- When delivering goods, do so through pick-up or delivery outside the premises. Advise drivers on good hygiene in the cab and provide them with sanitation gel and wipes. Delivery workers must be allowed to use facilities such as toilets, cafeterias, changing rooms and showers, albeit with the appropriate precautions (such as allowing only one user at a time and regular cleaning).
- Place an impervious barrier between workers, especially if they are not able to keep a 2-metre distance from each other. You can improvise barriers, for example from plastic sheeting, partitions, mobile drawers, or storage units (avoid things that are not solid or that have gaps, like pot plants or trolleys, and be careful not to create a new risk, such as from tripping or falling objects). If you cannot use a barrier, allow additional space between workers, for example by ensuring they have at least two empty desks either side of them.
- If close contact is unavoidable, keep it to less than 15 minutes. Reduce contact between different parts of your business at the start and end of shifts. Arrange the timing of meal breaks to reduce the number of people sharing a cafeteria, staff room, or kitchen. Ensure there is only one worker at a time in bathrooms and changing rooms. Place a sign on the main door indicating when one of the toilets is in use to ensure that only one person at a time enters.
- Supply soap and water or hand sanitiser at convenient places and advise workers to wash their hands frequently. Clean your premises frequently, especially counters, door handles and other surfaces that people touch often and provide good ventilation if possible. If you have identified a risk of infection, provide all necessary PPE, following the guidance available on use of [facemasks](#) and [gloves](#).
- Facilitate workers' use of individual rather than collective transport, for example by making available car parking or a place for storing bicycles securely, and encouraging workers to walk to work, if possible.
- Put in place policies on flexible leave and remote working to limit presence at the workplace, when needed.

Refer to [COVID-19: guidance for the workplace](#) for further information on preparing your workplace for COVID-19, including what to do if someone infected with COVID-19 has been in the workplace and advice on travel and meetings.

Resuming work after a period of closure

If your workplace has been closed for a period for reasons related to COVID-19, make a plan for when work resumes that takes account of health and safety. You might consider the following in your plan:

- Update your [risk assessment](#) as described above and refer to [COVID-19: guidance for the workplace](#).

- Carry out adaptations to the layout of the workplace and the organisation of work that will reduce COVID-19 transmission before resuming work fully and before all workers return to the workplace. Consider resuming work in stages to allow adaptations to be carried out. Be sure to inform workers about the changes and provide them with new procedures and training, if necessary and feasible, before they resume work.
- Contact your occupational health service and health and safety advisor if you have access to one and discuss your plan with them.
- Pay special attention to workers who are at high risk and be prepared to protect the most vulnerable, including older people and those with [chronic conditions](#) (including hypertension, lung or heart problems, diabetes, or who are [undergoing cancer treatment or some other immunosuppression](#)) and [pregnant workers](#).
- Consider putting in place support for workers who may be going through a difficult time due to anxiety or stress. This could range from managers asking workers more often how they are, to an employee assistance programme or coaching service. Be aware that workers may have gone through traumatic events such as the serious illness or death of a relative or friend, or be experiencing financial difficulties or problems with their personal relationships. When physical distancing measures are in place, these problems are not only more likely, but the usual coping mechanisms, such as personal space, or sharing problems with others, are not available (see [Return to Work after sick leave due to mental health problems](#)).
- Workers might be worried about an increased chance of infection at the workplace and may not want to return. It is important to understand their concerns, provide information about the measures taken and the support available to them.

Coping with a high rate of absence

Depending on the infection rates in your local area and the protocols in effect, many of your workers may be absent because of COVID-19. If a worker is in isolation at home as a precaution, they may be able to continue their work remotely (see below), or if this is not the case, the worker will not be able to work for a period.

Workers who are confirmed as having COVID-19 will be absent and unable to work for significantly longer and those who become seriously ill may require a further period of rehabilitation once cured of the infection. In addition, some workers may be absent because they have to take care of a relative.

- The absence of a substantial number of workers, even if only temporary, may cause a strain on continuing activities. While you may expect the available workers to be flexible, it is important that they do not find themselves in a situation that will endanger their health or safety. Keep any additional workload as low as possible and ensure that it does not last too long. Line managers have an important role in monitoring the situation and ensuring that individual workers are not overburdened.
- When adapting work to cope with a reduced workforce, for example by putting in place new methods and procedures and changing roles and responsibilities, consider whether staff need additional training and support.
- Cross-train workers to perform essential functions so the workplace can operate even if key workers are absent.
- If relying on interim staff, it is important to inform them about workplace risks and provide them with training if necessary.

Managing workers working from home

As part of the physical distancing measures taken in most Member States, workers are encouraged or obliged to work from home if the nature of their job allows it. For most of these workers it is their first time as 'teleworkers' and their working environment is likely to be deficient in many aspects compared to their workplace. The extent to which the home environment can be adapted will vary according to the situation of the worker and the time and resources available for adaptations.

Advice on staying safe and healthy while working from home is available [here](#), but is largely directed at those who telework regularly or long-term. Below are some suggestions to minimise the risks to workers who have not been able to prepare their home workplace properly.

- Allow workers to take equipment that they use at work home on a temporary basis. This could include items such as computer, monitor, keyboard, mouse, printer, chair, footrest, or lamp. Keep a record of who takes what items to avoid confusion when normal work resumes.
- Provide teleworkers with guidance on setting up a workstation at home that applies good ergonomics as far as possible.
- Encourage workers to take regular breaks (around every 30 minutes) to stand up, move and stretch.
- Give teleworkers support in the use of IT equipment and software. Tele and video conferencing tools may become essential for work, but may be problematic for workers not used to them.
- Ensure that there is good communication at all levels that includes those working from home. This ranges from the strategic information provided by top-level management to line managers' duties, without forgetting the importance of routine social interaction among colleagues. While the former can be addressed in scheduled online meetings, the latter can be encouraged through online chats or 'virtual coffee' meetings.
- Do not underestimate the risk of workers feeling isolated and under pressure, which in the absence of support can lead to mental health problems. Effective communication and support from the manager and being able to maintain informal contact with colleagues is important.
- Be aware that your employee may have a partner who is also teleworking or children who may need care as they are not at school, or who need to connect remotely to continue their schoolwork. Others may need to care for elderly or chronically ill people and those that are in confinement. In these circumstances, managers will need to be flexible in terms of working hours and productivity of their staff.

Involve workers

The participation of workers in OSH management is a key to success and a legal obligation. This applies also to measures undertaken at workplaces in relation to COVID-19; a time when events develop quickly, with a high level of uncertainty and anxiety among workers and the population at large.

It is important that you talk with your workers and the health and safety representatives early on about planned changes and how these temporary processes work in practice. Engaging with your workers in assessing risks and developing responses is an important part of good health and safety practice. Health and safety representatives and health and safety committees are in a unique position to help design preventive measures and to ensure that they are implemented successfully.

Workers who are returning to the workplace after a period of isolation, whether as an individual measure or as part of a collective isolation, are likely to have worries, particularly about the risk of infection. These worries – especially if there have been changes to the job – may well result in stress

and mental health problems. Apart from ensuring effective communication, as mentioned above, consider designating someone that workers can talk to, or providing access to employee assistance programmes or coaching. Practical advice on how to look after your mental health and cope with the COVID-19 threat is available from [Mental Health Europe](#).

Take care of workers who have been ill

According to the World Health Organisation, the most [common symptoms of COVID-19](#) are fever, tiredness, and dry cough. Some people become infected but do not develop any symptoms and do not feel unwell. Most people (about 80%) recover from the disease without needing special treatment. Around one out of every six people who gets COVID-19 becomes seriously ill and develops difficulty breathing. Older people, and those with underlying medical problems like high blood pressure, heart problems or diabetes, are more likely to develop serious illness.

Persons who have become seriously ill may require special consideration even after being certified as fit for work. There are some indications that coronavirus patients may suffer from reduced lung capacity following a bout of the disease. Workers in this situation may need their work to be adapted and may need time off to undergo physiotherapy. Workers who have had to spend time in intensive care (IC) may face specific challenges when returning to work:

- [Muscle weakness](#). This is more serious the longer someone has been in IC. The reduced muscle capacity also manifests itself, for example, in respiratory complaints. Another common but less frequently recognised phenomenon is Post Intensive Care Syndrome (PICS). This happens to an estimated 30 to 50% of people admitted to IC and is comparable to a post-traumatic stress disorder.
- [Problems with memory and concentration](#). These complaints often only develop over time. Once someone has started working, this is not always recognised. The symptoms visible at work are memory and concentration problems, difficulty performing the tasks satisfactorily and poorer problem solving skills. It is therefore important to be alert to this if you know that someone has been in IC. Good guidance is very important, because it is difficult for some workers to return to their previous level of performance.
- [Long time for resuming work](#). Data show that a quarter to a third of those who are in IC can develop problems, independent of their age. Approximately half of patients need a year to resume work and up to a third may never return.

Occupational physicians and health services are best placed to advise on how to take care of workers who have been ill and on any adaptations need in their work. If you do not have an occupational health service, it is important to address these issues with sensitivity and to respect workers' privacy and confidentiality.

Be aware of the risk that workers who have been ill with COVID-19 may suffer stigma and discrimination.

Stay well informed

The amount of information related to COVID-19 can be overwhelming and it can be difficult to differentiate the reliable and accurate from the vague and misleading. Always check that the original source of the information is an established and qualified provider. Official sources of information on COVID-19 include:

- [World Health Organization](#)
- [European Centre for Disease Prevention and Control](#)
- [European Commission](#)

When physical distancing measures start to be relaxed, information may be issued that is specific to particular industries, communities, or groups, and it may be updated frequently. In your country, the ministries for health and for labour will have relevant information and may provide links to more specialised sources.

Sectors and occupations

People with jobs that put them in physical contact with many others are at the greatest risk of contracting COVID-19. Apart from workers in the healthcare, residential and home care, essential workers at increased risk include, for example, those involved in food supply and retail, waste collection, utilities, police and security, and public transport.

In the same way that some countries restricted work in some sectors before others – usually suspending education, leisure and entertainment first, and industry and construction last – the return to work following relaxation of the measures may well be similarly staggered, but in reverse order. Sector-specific guidance related to COVID-19 is available from several countries and a selection is listed below. Check the websites of your [national OSH authority or institute](#) for further examples.

Construction

- [Austria – construction](#) (DE)
- [Denmark – building and construction](#) (DK, [EN](#))
- [France – construction](#) (FR)
- [France – construction](#) (FR)
- [Germany – building and construction](#) (DE)
- [Germany – craftsmen](#) (DE)
- [Italy – building and construction](#) (IT)
- [Australia – building and construction](#) (EN)

Delivery

- [France – delivery](#) (FR)
- [Denmark – transporting goods](#) (DK)
- [Australia – drivers](#) (EN)

Retail

- [France – cashier](#) (FR)
- [France – retail shop](#) (FR)
- [Germany - cashier](#) (DE)
- [Germany – food retail and hospitality](#) (DE)
- [Netherlands - retail](#) (NL, [EN](#))
- [Australia – retail work](#) (EN)

Food

- [France – baker](#) (FR)
- [France – crop farming](#) (FR)
- [France – animal farming](#) (FR)

- [France – seasonal workers](#) (FR)
- [France – catering and takeaway food](#) (FR)
- [France – abattoir work](#) (FR)
- [Spain – agriculture and farming](#) (ES)
- [UK – food business](#) (EN)
- [Australia - agriculture](#) (EN)
- [Australia – food processing and manufacture](#) (EN)
- [WHO – food businesses](#) (EN)

Transport

- [France – garage](#) (FR)
- [Finland – public transport drivers](#) (FI, SV, EN)
- [Germany – transport](#) (DE)
- [Italy – transport](#) (IT)
- [Netherlands – transport and logistics](#) (NL)
- [Netherlands – transport and logistics](#) (NL)
- [EU \(EASA\) – aircraft and airports](#) (EN)
- [EU \(EASA\) – helicopter operations](#) (EN)
- [EU \(EMSA\) – maritime transport](#) (EN + others)
- [UK – shipping and sea ports](#) (EN)
- [UK – transport sector](#) (EN)
- [UK – freight transport](#) (EN)
- [Australia – taxi and ride-share](#) (EN)
- [Australia – road freight](#) (EN)
- [Australia – warehousing and logistics](#) (EN)

Maintenance

- [France - gardening](#) (FR)
- [Germany – tradesmen](#) (DE)

Leisure and entertainment

- [France – horse riding](#) (FR)
- [Finland – service industry](#) (FI, SV, EN)
- [WHO – hotels and guesthouses](#) (EN)

Education

- [UK – education settings](#) (EN)
- [US – schools and childcare](#) (EN)
- [US – colleges and universities](#) (EN)
- [Australia – pre-school and childcare](#) (EN)
- [WHO – schools](#) (EN)

Others

- [Austria – hairdressers](#) (DE)
- [France – hairdressers](#) (FR)
- [Spain – hairdressers](#) (ES)
- [Italy – healthcare workers](#) (IT)
- [UK – health professionals](#) (EN)

- [US – first responders and police](#) (EN)
- [UK - prisons](#) (EN)
- [US – prisons](#) (EN)
- [WHO – prisons](#) (EN)
- [UK – care homes](#) (EN)
- [WHO – care homes](#) (EN)
- [US – churches](#) (EN)
- [UK – homeless shelters](#) (EN)
- [US – homeless shelters](#) (EN)
- [US – retirement communities](#) (EN)
- [Australia – small business](#) (EN)
- [Germany – office work](#) (DE)
- [Italy – civil service](#) (IT)
- [Australia – office work](#) (EN)
- [Australia - hairdressing](#) (EN)
- [Germany – chemical energy mining](#) (DE)
- [Australia – domestic services](#) (EN)
- [Spain – maritime and fishing](#) (ES)
- [Spain – manufacturing](#) (ES)

Plan and learn for the future

It is important to draw up or update crisis contingency plans for shutdown and start-up events in the future. Even small businesses can make a checklist that will help prepare them should any such events occur in the future.

Enterprises that have used teleworking for the first time may consider adopting it as a modern, long-term working practice. The experience gained during the COVID-19 pandemic may feed into developing a teleworking policy and procedures or revising existing ones.