

Ministry of Health Work Health and Safety Advice 8 April 2020 COVID-19

General

A range of infection prevention and control protocols are in place for the safety of staff, pre-dating the outbreak of novel coronavirus (COVID-19). Clinical and support staff that work in clinical settings have existing knowledge about standard contact, droplet and airborne transmission precautions as part of training for their role. Health agencies should check that training for such staff is up to date and refresh where required.

Where infection control protocols are comprehensively followed the risk to NSW staff members of acquiring COVID-19 in their workplace is negligible. However, in the course of providing health care, workers may come in contact with patients or other staff members who are infectious with COVID-19, but where it has not been possible to recognise their risk of infection.

The risk to health care workers in this situation is minimised by public health measures of quarantining contacts of COVID-19 cases. It is also minimised by regular hand washing and avoiding touching one's face.

Staff support

Keep staff updated on COVID-19

Knowledge about COVID-19 continues to evolve and develop rapidly. Health agencies should ensure that all staff are provided with timely, up to date information about COVID-19 at regular intervals and consider how to support staff who are psychologically impacted; as well as practical concerns about transmission/ contracting the virus. Sessions for staff facilitated by health agency infection prevention and control experts may assist greatly in providing an opportunity for staff to ask questions about their concerns.

Engage your Employee Assistance Service/ Program

Health agencies should explore options to support staff via existing Employee Assistance Program (EAP) arrangements.

Actions may include:

- Raising the profile of the EAP service/ program within the health agency
- Encouraging staff to access available support services
- Increasing support services available to staff
- Providing onsite support sessions for staff where practical to do so

Provide additional support to non-clinical staff

Particular care and attention should be placed upon ensuring that non-clinical staff are provided with information in a format that does not assume clinical knowledge. This will be especially important for non-clinical staff that work in or are required to enter clinical environments (e.g. ward administration staff, cleaning and portering staff, food services staff, employed and contracted maintenance staff).

Working within NSW Health facilities

The risk of contracting COVID-19 is managed by specific additional precautions for patients with suspected/confirmed COVID-19 infection. Where such precautions are in place for a particular patient, bed or room (cohorted patients), they are signposted at the entry and associated personal protective equipment (PPE) is provided.

Local health agency based internal infection prevention & control teams should be approached for practical advice in the first instance; as such advice will consider the general requirements and the situational specific requirements (unique to patient cohort, treatment location etc). As the situation continues to develop this is subject to ongoing change.

Further information is available at the following sources:

<https://www.health.nsw.gov.au/Infectious/diseases/Pages/coronavirus-update.aspx>

<http://www.cec.health.nsw.gov.au/keep-patients-safe/COVID-19>

Working in the community setting- Recommended principles for planning community based care

Health Protection NSW have provided guidance for community-based and outpatient health services in relation to managing COVID-19 risks.

The advice is now available at the following source:

<https://www.health.nsw.gov.au/Infectious/diseases/Pages/covid-19-community-outpatient.aspx>

SafeWork NSW notification re: COVID-19

Notification to SafeWork NSW may be required in relation to a worker (or others including patients and visitors) arising from COVID-19 matters. Information is provided below to assist in determining if you need to notify SafeWork NSW of a Notifiable Incident via 13 10 50 is required. Given penalties can apply for failure to notify; if in doubt, notify.

Where a notification is made; SafeWork NSW have advised that in most cases their response would likely be administrative only for COVID-19 notifications; unless there was evidence that safe systems of work were not in place to manage the risk.

Statement of Regulatory Intent- SafeWork NSW Re: COVID-19:

<https://www.safework.nsw.gov.au/news/safework-public-notice/statement-of-regulatory-intent-covid-19>

When SafeWork NSW notification re: COVID-19 is required:

Health Agencies **are required** to notify SafeWork NSW of serious illnesses (including COVID-19) arising out of the conduct of the health agency including:

- **illness** requiring the person to have **immediate treatment as an in-patient in a hospital** and/ or
- any **confirmed infection** to which the carrying out of work is a significant contributing factor, including any infection that is reliably attributable to carrying out work that involves providing treatment or care to a person, or that involves contact with human blood or body substances

When SafeWork NSW notification is not required:

Health agencies **are not required** to notify SafeWork NSW where a person requires self-isolation **due to work or non- work related** risk of COVID-19 exposure. Per the above; notification is only required where the person requires immediate treatment as an in-patient due to the exposure or has a confirmed COVID-19 infection.

For general information about notifying SafeWork NSW about notifying a work-related death, injury, illness or dangerous incident workplace injury or illness see: <https://www.safework.nsw.gov.au/notify-safework/incident-notification>

Incident reporting- IIMS/ ims+ COVID-19 exposures

Wherever practical to do so, existing health agency processes for incident reporting using the Incident Information Management System (IIMS) or Incident Management System Plus (ims+) as applicable should be followed in full.

Where a staff member indicates privacy concerns about being identified in the incident reporting system as exposed to COVID-19 and, or confirmed COVID-19 infection, in place of identifying them by name, date of birth etc, their employee number can be used as a unique identifier instead, with asterisks used in place of mandatory fields for name, date of birth etc.

SafeWork NSW have confirmed their approval of this approach, but have also indicated they will still require the usual affected party details when undertaking a notifiable incident investigation (name, date of birth, address, phone number).

Requests/ Refusal to undertake Work Duties in areas with COVID-19 Patients

Groups or individual staff members may indicate they do not feel safe in undertaking part/all of their normal work duties due to concerns about risk of exposure to COVID-19. Health Agencies should approach such situations in a way that is sensitive to the concerns of staff and provides such staff with the necessary support and assistance to undertake their normal work duties as required. Staff are to undertake their normal duties during this challenging period.

Should groups or individual staff members refuse to or request not to undertake part/all of their normal work duties due to concerns about risk of contracting COVID-19, contact the following for situationally specific advice:

Your Health Agency:

- Risk Management & Work Health and Safety Teams
- Infection Prevention and Control Teams
- Industrial Relations Teams (industrial aspects)

These teams may contact Ministry of Health, Workplace Relations Branch via MOH-WorkplaceRelationsCOVID-19@health.nsw.gov.au or 02 9391 9360.

Australian Health Protection Principal Committee Recommendations for Managing Vulnerable Workers

The AHPPC provided advice on 30 March 2020 in relation to vulnerable workers, extract below, source [here](#)

The Australian Health Protection Principal Committee (AHPPC) on the advice of the Communicable Diseases Network Australia (CDNA) today considered provisions for essential workers who are considered to be most at risk of acquiring COVID-19 and at higher risk of serious illness if they become unwell.

Excluding healthcare settings where appropriate PPE and precautions are adhered to, the AHPPC considers that, given the transmission characteristics of the virus, the following settings are at higher risk of outbreaks of COVID-19:

- Correctional and detention facilities
- Group residential settings

AHPPC considers that, based on the limited current evidence, the following people are, or are likely to be, at higher risk of serious illness if they are infected with the virus:

- Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people 50 years and older with one or more chronic medical conditions
- People 65 years and older with chronic medical conditions. Conditions included in the definition of 'chronic medical conditions' will be refined as more evidence emerges. The most current list can be accessed on the Department of Health website
- People 70 years and older
- People with compromised immune systems (see Department of Health website)

There is limited evidence at this time regarding the risk in pregnant women.

AHPPC recommends that where vulnerable workers undertake **essential work, a risk assessment must be undertaken**. Risk needs to be assessed and mitigated with consideration of the characteristics of the worker, the workplace and the work. This includes **ensuring vulnerable people are redeployed to non-customer-based roles where possible**. Where risk cannot be appropriately mitigated, employers and employees should consider alternate arrangements to accommodate a workplace absence.

AHPPC recommends that special provisions apply to essential workers who are at higher risk of serious illness and, where the risk cannot be sufficiently mitigated, should not work in high risk setting.

Key factors for Health Agencies to consider when Undertaking a Risk Assessment in relation to a COVID-19 Vulnerable Worker

Factors include:

1. Whether the worker meets the AHPPC criteria for people at risk of serious illness
2. The nature of the duration, frequency and closeness of the worker's interaction with patients
3. Whether the worker is trained in and able to effectively use recommended PPE when in contact with patients
4. The opportunity for alternative work to be performed that does not expose the employee to COVID-19 related whether in the workplace or through access to flexible working practices

Working From Home or a Self-Isolation Location

Health agencies are likely to be experiencing increased numbers of staff moving toward working from home or a self-isolation location where practical for the staff member and the health agency. Business as usual protocols for establishing working remotely/ working from home arrangements may not align with the need to expedite arrangements.

Reasonable steps should be taken to ensure a worker's work area meets workplace health and safety requirements. An assessment of the work area should be carried out, where possible, before the worker starts working from the location; SafeWork NSW have provided a checklist to assist with assessing work areas.

SafeWork NSW have provided information on their [Coronavirus advice and guidance for NSW workplaces](#) page about working remotely, including a working from home [checklist](#).

Attending work is a reasonable excuse to leave your place of residence under the NSW movement orders put in place on 30 March 2020

Whether a staff member can work from their place of residence is a question of whether it is reasonable to work from home or self-isolation location.

Whether it is reasonable to work from home or self-isolation location will depend on:

1. The needs of the health agency (including any directions of the health agency for staff to physically attend at workplace);
2. The inherent requirements of the job; and
3. Whether the staff member's home or self-isolation location is sufficiently equipped to allow them to fulfil the inherent requirements of their job from home safely and reasonably.

Further information on Novel Coronavirus:

- NSW Government
<https://preview.nsw.gov.au/covid-19>
- NSW Health:
<https://www.health.nsw.gov.au/Infectious/diseases/Pages/coronavirus.aspx>
- Clinical Excellence Commission:
<http://cec.health.nsw.gov.au/keep-patients-safe/infection-prevention-and-control/Coronavirus-COVID-19>
- SafeWork Australia
<https://www.safeworkaustralia.gov.au/doc/coronavirus-covid-19-advice-employers>
- SafeWork NSW
<https://www.safework.nsw.gov.au/hazards-a-z/diseases/coronavirus-covid-19-advice-and-guidance-for-nsw-workplaces>