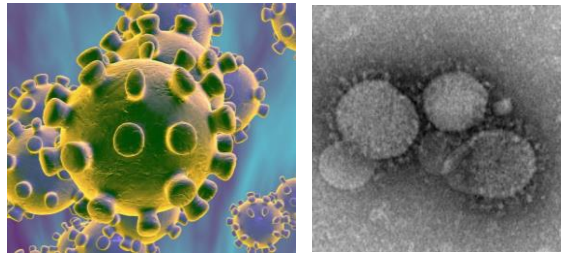|	# Information on the coronavirus (COVID-19) for employers and employees.

What is a coronavirus and where did it come from?

Coronaviruses (CoV) are mainly spread amongst animals and birds. In humans, they are typically associated with mild illnesses, similar to the common cold. The viruses usually cause self-limited upper respiratory tract infection.

On 31 December 2019 a cluster of pneumonia cases were reported by the World Health Organization in Wuhan, China. On 7 January 2020 the cause was identified as a new novel coronavirus. The virus is most probably from wild animals held captive in food markets in China.

The disease caused by the virus is now known as COVID-19 (coronavirus disease 2019)

How is COVID-19 transmitted?

The main route of transmission is respiratory droplets that people sneeze, cough, drip, or exhale. They travel only short distances before settling, usually less than 1 meter. This is NOT the same as airborne transmission, where the virus is transmitted while suspended in air for prolonged periods of time.

COVID-19 is also transmitted via direct contact, i.e. touching of an ill person or contaminated surface, and is excreted in stool.

The incubation period is 14 days (95th percentile = 12.5 days)

What are the workplace consequences of COVID-19?

More than 98% of people who contract COVID-19 recover.
The health consequences of the COVID-19 infections predict the workforce consequences:
→ 80% of people have a mild to moderate disease similar to a cold or flu, and will require time off work
→ 15-20% of people require hospitalisation and will require extensive time off work
→ Overall, 2% of people die, with loss of staff and skills

These direct consequences will impact directly on the workplace personnel, and other non-direct economic consequences should also be taken into consideration.

Business continuity and pandemic preparedness

Businesses should develop a continuity plan, and a pandemic preparedness plan, especially if the business is operated in more than one location and more than one country. The aim is to ensure smooth business operations during a time of social change or crisis.

This involves:
→ Scenario planning with actions to take after suspected or confirmed cases
→ Human resources planning with sick leave and absence arrangements
→ Possible partnerships with local authorities and health facilities

How can we mitigate the risks?

There are 4 pillars of workplace risk mitigation:
1. Educate and inform employees about the disease and the company approach to managing the risk
2. Initiate and promote strategies to minimise the risk of transmission of the disease
3. Early identification of the disease in the workplace
4. Response to people identified as potential cases

1. Educate and inform

Provide employees with facts about the disease and how it is spread, and beware of myths.

The company should have a clear policy on sick leave for persons with flu-like symptoms. Consideration should be given to working from home.

2. Minimise the risk of transmission in the workplace

This is the most important part of mitigating the risk of workplace infection!

Disinfect surfaces like desks, telephones, keyboards, etc. regularly. Also include doorknobs, handles, railings, etc.	
Promote the regular and thorough washing of hands by all employees, contractors and visitors: • Placement of hand washing posters in bathrooms • Alcohol based hand rub and soap dispensers for easy use • Watch out for the towels when drying the hands • Make it easy!	
Respiratory hygiene should be promoted: • Coughing and sneezing techniques, i.e. cover the mouth and nose with a flexed elbow or a tissue • Consider providing tissues etc. which is only used once and then discarded • Promote hand washing after coughing and sneezing	
General hygiene should be promoted: • Remind employees not to share eating utensils, cups, etc. • Dishes and utensils should be washed with soap and water after use • Remove magazines and papers from waiting areas or common rooms • Ensure that the ventilation system is working properly	

Social distancing techniques in the workplace that should be considered: • Using the telephone or video conferencing instead of direct contact to conduct business • Allow employees to work from home • Allow employees to work flexible hours as to avoid peak public transport situations and crowding in the workplace • Avoid shaking hands • Encourage or insist on symptomatic persons to stay away from work	
Personal protective equipment always a last resort • The aim would be to prevent exposure to droplets • Gloves are not particularly useful, if someone touches infective areas and then touch non-infected areas, they spread the diseases. Disinfection of the area may be a better option • Eye protection is mainly used for health care workers • Masks should be provided to sick persons to prevent the spread of droplets and virus	

3. Early identification of persons at risk with appropriate response

The case definition for a potential case is:
→ A person with acute respiratory illness with sudden onset of at least one of the following: cough, sore throat, shortness of breath, fever > 38°C
→ **AND** in the previous 14 days before the symptoms started:
- Were in close contact with a laboratory confirmed or probable case of COVID-19
- OR travelled to an area with a known outbreak
- OR worked in or were treated in a health care facility where patients with COVID-19 were treated
- OR are admitted with severe pneumonia of unknown origin

A close contact is defined as someone with face to face contact with a COVID-19 case or in a close environment with a COVID-19 case
→ Persons in the same household as a COVID-19 case
→ People working closely with a COVID-19 case
→ Health care workers caring for a COVID-19 case
→ People on an aircraft sitting within 2 seats of a COVID-19 case
→ Travel companions or aircraft crew providing care for a COVID-19 case

4. Response to possible case of COVID-19 amongst employees

All persons who meet the case definition should be isolated and provided with a mask. The person should be taken to the nearest pre-determined health centre where personnel are able to collect the sample, liaise with the NICD and further manage the patient.

Only persons who conform to the case definition will be tested by the National Institute for Communicable Diseases, via determined protocols and with communication through established channels.

Close contacts of the person with potential COVID-19 should be asked to self-isolate at home and avoid unnecessary social contact until the diagnosis is confirmed:
- → Travel should be avoided and the persons should be reachable for monitoring
- → The NICD Close Contact Monitoring Tool should be provided to contacts to assist in the monitoring
  http://www.nicd.ac.za/wp-content/uploads/2020/02/COVID_19_Symptom_Monitoring_tool_v6_14.02.2020.pdf
- → Regular communication should be in place to detect problems early.

Business travel and COVID-19

Travel poses significant risk in outbreak situations, as it places employees at risk when they travel to an area of a known outbreak, but also others when infected employees return. Travel provides the infection with a pathway to spread to previously unexposed areas.

Business should understand the risk and make informed decisions about the risk/benefit of travelling.

Considerations before travel:
- → Is there an outbreak in the place to where the employee is travelling to or from?
- → What is the risk vs the benefit of the travel?
- → Is the employee healthy?
  - o Persons with underlying illnesses are at more risk of a severe illness
  - o Persons who are already ill with fever and influenza like symptoms will be detained in the place of outbreak, or will be refused entry

Considerations during travel:
- → Hand washing, avoiding sick people, good cough etiquette
- → What to do when one becomes ill, e.g. who to contact or where to go
- → What to do upon return if you become ill

Suggested approach:
- → The company should have detailed registers of all employees who travel, where they travel and where they are at any given time
- → The countries with reported cases should be checked daily to make sure of the outbreak status of the country where employees are travelling to and from http://www.nicd.ac.za/covid-19-update-7/
- → If an employee returns from an area without an outbreak, no specific action is required and a return to work should be in order, with self-monitoring for symptoms of COVID-19
- → If an employee returns from an outbreak area, there should an isolation period at home for a period of 14 days, with self-monitoring for symptoms of COVID-19
  - o The company should be in regular contact with the employee
  - o Should symptoms compatible with the case definition develop in the 14 days, immediate health care should be obtained

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