



**Directorate of Environmental health, Occupational health and Food safety,
Ministry of Health and Indigenous Medical Services**

Guidelines on COVID-19 preparedness for workplaces

This document outlines the guidelines to be followed at workplaces, to prevent/ control the spread of COVID-19 infection and to promote the health of workers. The measures are simple to follow and can be adopted easily.

Introduction

COVID-19 infection, coronavirus disease is a respiratory disease which has been declared a pandemic by the World Health Organization.

Although, only a few cases were reported in Sri Lanka, initially, over the past few days the number of cases have risen. Therefore, it is crucial to remain vigilant. As workplaces are frequented by a large number of people, it is a collective responsibility of all to keep workplaces safe.

Common features

The common features of COVID-19 infection are fever and respiratory symptoms such as cough, runny nose, sore throat and/ or shortness of breath. These have to be of acute onset. Complications such as pneumonia, sever acute respiratory syndrome, kidney failure and death have been reported according to the severity of the disease.

Case definition (used currently)

- 1. A suspected case** – A person with ACUTE RESPIRATORY ILLNESS (with cough, SOB, sore throat) with a history of FEVER (at any point of time during the illness), returning to Sri Lanka from ANY COUNTRY within the last 14 days

Or

A person with respiratory illness AND having been a close contact* with a confirmed or suspected COVID-19 case during the last 14 days prior to the onset of symptoms

(*A close contact – A person staying in an enclosed environment for > 15 min (eg: same household, workplace, social gathering, travelling in same vehicle)

- 2. A confirmed case** – A person with laboratory confirmation of COVID-19 infection, irrespective of clinical signs and symptoms.

Methods of transmission

The transmission of the disease is by 3 methods

- 1. Droplets** – The virus can be transmitted by breathing infected droplets. Droplets can be produced during coughing or sneezing or even by exhales from infected persons. These droplets can travel up to a distance of 1m.
- 2. Indirect** – When an infected person coughs, sneezes or exhales, droplets of infected fluid may get released and contaminate nearby surfaces and objects, such as desks, tables or telephones. An uninfected person may contract the virus by touching these surfaces and then touching their eyes, nose or mouth.
- 3. Direct** – Person to person transmission by direct contact with an infected person. (Eg: hugging). The virus can enter the body through nose, mouth or eyes.

Prevention

Standard precautions are recommended to prevent the spread of disease.

All workers are expected to adhere to the following good practices, regardless of the exposure risk level.

1. Promote frequent and thorough hand washing. Hand washing can be made mandatory for visitors and workers on arriving at work place.

Thorough hand hygiene should be done. Hand washing with soap and running water is preferred. When hand washing cannot be performed hand hygiene by hand rubbing with alcohol based hand rub (75% - 85% v/v alcohol) has to be done.

These facilities should be provided at all workplaces for all workers and visitors because washing hands with soap and water or using an alcohol-based hand rub will help prevent the spread of COVID-19.

2. Encourage respiratory etiquette, including covering coughs and sneezes. Coughs and sneezes have to be covered by the inner side of elbow or sleeve. In a situation where this is not possible a tissue can be used to cover the nose/ mouth, provided the tissue is discarded into a foot/pedal operated bin and hands are washed in the above-mentioned process, afterwards.

3. Encourage workers to stay home if they are sick. All sick persons with a cough, sore throat or sneeze etc. at work should wear a mask. The mask should be worn properly according to the following method;

The wire on the top edge of the mask should be placed over the bridge of the nose and the outside of the mask should have folds that can be expanded downwards. Refrain from touching the mask, while wearing it. After removing the mask, it has to be discarded into a foot/ pedal operated bin and hands washed in the above-mentioned process, afterwards. Please note that there should be minimal handling of the mask when removing.

Wearing masks routinely, without any specific indications is not encouraged.

Wearing gloves under general working conditions is not required and is not recommended, unless there is a specific indication.

Keep surgical masks and/or paper tissues at your workplace for use by those who may develop a runny nose or cough at work, along with foot/ pedal operated closed bins for their hygienic disposal, because good respiratory hygiene, including covering a cough or sneeze with a tissue or flexed elbow, prevents the spread of COVID-19

Keep surgical masks and/or paper tissues at your workplace for use by those who may develop a runny nose or cough at work, along with foot/ pedal operated closed bins for their hygienic disposal, because good respiratory hygiene, including covering a cough or sneeze with a tissue or flexed elbow, prevents the spread of COVID-19

4. Discourage workers from using other workers' mobile phones, pens and other common telephones, fax machines, desks, or other work tools and equipment, whenever possible.
5. Maintain regular housekeeping practices, including routine wiping/ cleaning and disinfecting of surfaces, equipment, and other elements of the work environment.
All metal surfaces to be disinfected with 70% alcohol solution and all non-metal surfaces disinfected with 0.1% sodium hypochlorite, after cleaning by damp dusting/ wet mopping with soap and water or a general-purpose detergent.
Please note, that door knobs/ handles have to be cleaned by damp dusting and disinfected every three hours.
All other surfaces can be cleaned by damp dusting and disinfected at-least 3 times per day.
Floors can be cleaned by wet mopping at least 3 times per day and disinfecting is required only if there is a possibility spill of body fluids or any other infectious material.
6. Open doors with elbow or use a tissue to open door knobs and discard it into a foot/ pedal operated bin and wash hands, as mentioned above.
7. Discourage workers from shaking hands/ hugging and adopt other non-touch techniques of greeting.
8. Refrain from touching the face.
9. Avoid spitting in public places.

10. Specific Measures (11 to16) to be adopted (in addition to the general measures described) for staff at service counters. (Ticket counters, super market counters, banks etc.)

11. Always wear a mask. (Mask should be worn securely and properly and should not be touched thereafter until it is removed)
12. If possible keep a distance of one meter from the customer **or alternatively** have a blind/glass/plastic shield in front of the counter leaving a space at the bottom to carry out transactions.
13. Minimum handling of cash (ask for a credit/debit card). When using the credit/debit card ask the customer to insert it and remove it from the machine.
14. The officer in the counter should not share the pen used to sign the documents (The customer should use his own pen)
15. Keep an alcohol rub/hand sanitizer by side (one per each person in the counter) and use it as frequently as possible **or alternatively** wear gloves. (Gloves should never be re-used and disposed to a closed pedal bin when the duty shift is over)
16. Disinfect the surfaces including machines as mentioned above.
17. Overall, maintain good personal health and hygiene. Ensure a well-balanced diet to maintain good nutrition to improve immunity and drink adequate amounts of water. Maintain physical fitness by regular exercise. Abstain from unhealthy habits such as smoking and consuming alcohol, which may weaken immunity.
Encourage uplifting the mental well-being of workers by promoting relaxation exercises, breathing exercises and\or listening to music at, individual level.

A healthy lifestyle must be adopted as there is evidence to indicate that individuals with unhealthy habits such as smokers have a higher risk of developing severe form of the infection.

To promote the good practices at workplaces employers are expected to ensure the following:

18. Provide facilities for hand washing with adequate amounts of soap and water. Provide alcohol based hand rub at accessible places for frequent hand disinfection for workers and visitors.

19. Depending on the requirement, personal protective equipment (PPE) such as gloves, goggles, face masks, gowns or aprons (when appropriate), must be provided to the employees and they should be encouraged to wear them, according to recommendations.
20. Improve ventilation in workplaces and where feasible install air filters. Where air conditioners are not used leave the doors open.
21. Provision of adequate amounts of safe drinking water at workplaces.
22. Restrict large gatherings. Consider whether a face-to-face meeting or event is needed. To avoid contact with foreigners and persons that may be harbouring the infection, alternative methods of communication, video conferencing etc. is recommended.

If a meeting is essential to be held,

- Minimize the number of attendees
 - Do not shake hands with other participants, instead adopt other non-touch techniques
 - Pre-order sufficient supplies and materials, including tissues and hand sanitizer for all participants.
 - Have surgical masks available to offer anyone who develops respiratory symptoms.
 - Maintain a distance of 1m between participants
 - Follow all the hygienic measures outlined above
23. Minimize overcrowding at workplace and maintain a distance of at least 1m between persons.

Consider taking administrative controls to avoid crowding in all operations of your workplace. Eg: restricting the number of workers per shift, avoiding overcrowding in transporting workers, maintaining at least 1m distance in checking workers at security posts, restricting worker numbers at meal rooms etc
 24. Where foreign travel is required, comply with local restrictions for travel. Assess the benefits and risks related to planned international travel based on the latest updates.
 25. Disposal of waste to be carried out as per the guidelines routinely followed. All cleaning staff should be given training on the correct procedure of waste management. They should be provided with suitable PPE, including industrial gloves

and provided with adequate facilities for hand washing, with soap and water to ensure occupational health and safety.

Special attention should be given to cleaning staff to ensure their occupational health and safety because they handle potential infected material containing COVID-19

26. Providing all workers with up-to-date education and training on COVID-19 infection, risk factors and protective behaviors (e.g., cough etiquette and care of PPE).
27. Posters and health education messages to be displayed to encourage workers to comply with good hygienic practices, specially hand washing in proper technique and cough etiquette.
28. All sick workers are encouraged to stay home until recovery and leave to be granted by the employer.
29. Different modes of working (working from home, tele working) could be initiated, depending on feasibility and the nature of work.
30. Provide the following support to improve the mental wellbeing of the staff
 - Regularly and supportively monitor your staff for their wellbeing and foster an environment which promotes staff speaking with you if they have issues
 - Ensure the provision of accurate information updates to all staff members to reduce uncertainty
 - Provide a brief and regular forum to allow workers to express their concerns and ask questions and encourage peer-support amongst colleagues.
31. All workplaces should develop a suitable focal point (a nursing officer, a safety officer, Human Resource Manager or any officer found to be suitable and responsible for the position) to monitor the control activities implemented against COVID-19 infection and to provide necessary guidance in case of queries.

Important: Please note that individual risk factors may increase the susceptibility to the infection, and be given special consideration.

Those with reduced immunity and people suffering from conditions such as uncontrolled diabetes, heart, liver and lung disease are more at risk. The risk also increases with advancing age and people over 40 years seem more vulnerable to COVID-19 infection.

Special advice in case of detecting a suspected case at the workplace

In the event of detecting a suspected case in the workplace, necessary action should be taken to transfer the worker to the nearest government hospital, by ambulance.

Suwaseriya ambulance service can be contacted by dialing 1990 or seek assistance from the contact numbers mentioned below.

The suspected worker should wear a mask and kept in isolation and all relevant precautions mentioned above to be taken to limit the spread of the disease, until transfer to hospital. A specific isolation room has to be identified in the workplace in advance. The room should be one that can be easily disinfected when required.

In the event of the suspected case becoming positive, his or her close contacts will need 14 days of home quarantine (self isolation).

- (*A close contact – A person staying in an enclosed environment for > 15 min (eg: same household, workplace, social gathering, travelling in same vehicle)

Disinfection of all surfaces, equipment, and other elements of the work environment need to be done as per the cleaning and disinfecting instructions mentioned in the guideline.

All workplaces are advised to develop a COVID-19 Preparedness plan; considering the occupational exposure level of employees, the individual risk factors and other recommended good practices mentioned in this guideline. This will not only enable the prevention/ control of the spread of infection but will also prevent panic situations in the event of detecting a suspected case.

For more information

In case more information regarding COVID-19 infection is required please contact;

- The Ministry of Health hotline, available 24 hours - 94 113 071 073
- The Government media unit hotline – 117
- Suwa seriya Health line – 94 710 107 107
- Area Medical Officer of Health

Or please visit the following websites

Ministry of health website <http://www.health.gov.lk>

Epidemiology unit website <http://www.epid.gov.lk>

Health promotion bureau website <http://www.hpb.health.gov.lk/>