

CORONAVIRUS:

STEPS TO HELP ENSURE SAFETY IN THE WORKPLACE

News of the coronavirus is everywhere, and the fear that is the product of this news seems more widespread than the virus itself. That said, there is much truth in the adage, “an ounce of prevention is worth a pound of cure.” Employers have the responsibility to provide a safe workplace. What actions should companies take to ensure workplace safety?

The Basics

The CDC has a page on its website devoted to the coronavirus, which may be of interest to anyone who’d like more information: <https://www.cdc.gov/coronavirus/2019-ncov/index.html>

Per the CDC, symptoms may be mild to severe (about 16% of cases) and tend to be more serious in “older people and people with certain underlying health conditions like heart disease, lung disease and diabetes.” Symptoms appear 2–14 days after exposure and include fever, cough, and shortness of breath. While potentially fatal, the fatality rate is less than 3%.

While we are still learning how the disease is spread, the assumption is that it’s person to person between people who are within about 6 feet of one another through respiratory droplets that are spread when an infected person coughs or sneezes.

For that reason, some basic hygiene tips are important to remember:

- ❖ Cover your mouth when you cough or sneeze. Use a tissue and dispose of it in the trash, but if you don’t have one, use your arm or sleeve (not your hands) to cover.
- ❖ Wash your hands. Use soap and water and scrub for about 20 seconds. If you can’t wash your hands, use hand sanitizer. You’ll want to do this frequently, especially after using the restroom, before eating or preparing food, after caring for someone who is sick, after coughing or sneezing, and after handling animals or touching garbage.
- ❖ Clean shared surfaces, such as doorknobs, handles, copy machines, coffee makers, and the like, often with disinfectants.
- ❖ Avoid touching your eyes, nose and mouth.
- ❖ Stay home when you are sick. Go to the doctor if needed. If you suspect you have been exposed to the coronavirus, call your doctor to request instructions before heading into their office.

Other Considerations

Most of the prevention information is taught in elementary school as part of basic cleanliness; however, employers may have some additional questions about how to deal with employees who might have been exposed to the coronavirus or are fearful of it.

- ❖ **Employee Quarantine:** If you know that any of your employees have traveled to China, you could consider telling them to stay home from work for an additional 14 days and self-monitor for symptoms of the coronavirus. You could also recommend that they get tested before returning to work even if they are asymptomatic.
- ❖ **Employee Education:** You can provide educational information about the coronavirus to your employees. The CDC's website is a great resource: <https://www.cdc.gov/coronavirus/2019-ncov/index.html>
- ❖ **Travel Policies:** Employers may decide to cancel any business trips to China and other areas affected by the coronavirus. For example, American Airlines has cancelled all flights to China (after the Allied Pilots Association filed a suit), and the National Symphony Orchestra canceled stops in China and Japan that had been planned as part of their Asia tour. Employers may also request that their employees inform them of any personal travel plans they have to affected areas. Employers should let their employees know if they plan on requesting a 14-day quarantine before employees are allowed to return to the office after such travel.
- ❖ **Workers Comp:** Employers may need to pay Workers Comp if an employee contracts coronavirus as part of their employment, such as a healthcare worker who is exposed to an infected person. On the other hand, if an employee catches coronavirus from a coworker, there probably would not be a responsibility to provide Workers Comp.
- ❖ **Leave Benefits:** Depending on the severity of the illness, certain leave benefits may apply, such as FMLA and short-term disability, if applicable.
- ❖ **OSHA:** Depending on the industry, OSHA may cite employers who are determined to have exposed their workforce to the coronavirus. Per the Society for Human Resource Management (SHRM), "[OSHA] will determine whether the employer's industry knows that exposure to infected individuals in the workplace is a hazard. If so, the agency would expect the employer to take feasible measures to protect the employees and, if it not does not take such action, the employer could be subject to citation. Employers should conduct a hazard assessment for potential exposures and develop an action plan that includes hazard identification, hazard prevention procedures, employee training, medical monitoring surveillance and recordkeeping."
- ❖ **Employee Accommodations:** Employers may be required to provide accommodations to employees who could potentially be exposed to coronavirus as part of their work. One example is airline employees who have to interact with travelers from China; these employees may not want to work in public-facing positions due to risk of infection. If objective evidence of potential infection exists, employees should not be disciplined for refusing to work; however, per SHRM, "If the employer can establish that there is no basis for any exposure to the disease, the employee does not have to be paid during the time period the employee refuses to work."

What is Most Important in the Short-term?

While there have been cases of coronavirus reported in the United States, we do not know that it will be a full-blown epidemic, at least at the time of this writing. Employers may still want to take some action to reduce the likelihood of spreading diseases in the workplace. In the short-term, consider the following actions, which are prudent for keeping your office healthy at any time.

🌿 Cleanliness

- If not already doing so, employers could consider providing hand sanitizer (which is 65–90% alcohol) and preferably facilities for employees to wash their hands with soap and water.
- Employers may also consider stocking tissues and disinfectant wipes and cleansers for use in their work space.
- Employers should consider communicating with their employees about basic tips for cleanliness and reducing the spread of disease. They should announce if they have made changes, such as stocking disinfectant wipes for cleaning work stations so that all employees know about the supplies that are available for use. In addition, the CDC has created posters with cleanliness reminders that can be downloaded and posted in the office:
 - <https://www.cdc.gov/nonpharmaceutical-interventions/pdf/slow-spread-germs-item1.pdf>
 - <https://www.cdc.gov/nonpharmaceutical-interventions/pdf/dont-spread-germs-work-item3.pdf>
 - <https://www.cdc.gov/handwashing/posters.html>

🌿 Leave

- Employers should encourage employees who are sick to stay home. If employees have a fever, they should be free of fever (naturally, without taking any fever-reducing medication) for 24 hours before returning to work. Whether the time off is paid or not will depend on your company policy.

For More Information

For more information or assistance, please contact our Human Resources team at **210-775-6082**, toll-free at **1-888-757-2104**, or **HRManagement@BFGonline.com**.



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