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Coronavirus (COVID-19) advice for UK employers

Understand how to support your business and workforce through this global health emergency

Introduction

COVID-19 is classed as a pandemic by the World Health Organization. As the risk of infection from the virus continues, it's posing a significant challenge to many organisations.

This factsheet provides an overview of the current coronavirus situation. It explains what the virus is and gives advice on how employers should respond to the threat and support employees by being prepared, particularly looking after employees' health and safety and developing flexible resourcing plans.

We're updating this factsheet regularly to ensure it reflects government advice as this evolves.

What is coronavirus (COVID-19)?

Coronaviruses (CoV) are a large family of viruses that cause illness ranging from the common cold to more severe diseases such as MERS-CoV and SARS (Cov). The official name for this new disease, not previously seen in humans, is COVID-19. On 11 March 2020, the World Health Organization (WHO) categorised it as a 'pandemic' which, in WHO terms, is 'the worldwide spread of a disease'.

COVID-19 spreads where there is close contact between people. If someone with the virus coughs or exhales and is close to someone else, the other person could catch it by breathing in droplets of infected fluid. People can also catch it by touching contaminated surfaces or objects. Most people infected with the virus have mild symptoms and recover, but some experience more serious illness and may need hospital care. People over 40 seem to be more vulnerable, as are those with weakened immune systems or an

underlying health condition such as diabetes, cancer and lung disease. The virus also appears to have a disproportionate impact on people from ethnic minorities.

The incubation period of COVID-19 is between 2 and 14 days. Common signs of infection include a high temperature, a new continuous cough, or a change or loss of sense of smell, though there are other symptoms, and some people who have the virus are asymptomatic.

Following the first UK peak of the pandemic in spring 2020, there was a steady decrease in new cases in all four nations over the summer months. Infection rates started rising again in September, with a third steep rise in December. A new more-easily transmissible variant of the virus became widespread in the UK, and all areas entered into a period of tight restrictions or lockdowns. Rates started to fall again in January 2021 and, following a recommendation from the UK Chief Medical Officers, the UK COVID-19 alert level moved from level 5 to level 4 on 25 February.

Three vaccines have been approved for use in the UK so far, and the NHS continues to roll out a nationwide vaccination programme. Read our guide for employers on preparing for the COVID-19 vaccination.

How employers should respond to the COVID-19 threat

As infection from the virus continues to pose a risk in the UK, all employers and workers are being affected in some way. People's health and wellbeing, and stringent measures to prevent the virus from spreading, should still be at the heart of every employer's response.

We'll continue to signpost latest developments, collate and publish updated resources, more detailed guidance and FAQs on our Responding to the coronavirus hub.

Be informed and prepared

- **Keep up to date with government and public health advice:** This is still a fast-moving issue. Employers should keep up to date daily with the situation as it develops, and refer employees who are concerned about infection, using official and expert medical sources such as GOV.UK, the National Health Service and NHS 111online coronavirus service. Government data on COVID-19 is updated daily.
- **Continue to use the basic but effective hygiene protection measures to help prevent the infection's spread**, including:

- Make sure your workplace is clean and hygienic.
 - Promote regular and thorough hand-washing by everyone.
 - Provide all employees with an alcohol-based hand rub.
 - Encourage people to use and bin tissues.
 - Implement the [Working safely during coronavirus \(COVID-19\) guidance](#).
- On 22 February 2021, the Prime Minister announced a [roadmap for England](#) to start **easing lockdown restrictions** as a staged process subject to four tests; from 29 March people were no longer legally be required to stay at home but people should still work from home wherever they can until at least June. [Scotland](#) announced a cautious acceleration of its lockdown easing on 9 March and [Wales](#) started its unlocking process on 16 March. In [Northern Ireland](#) some easing started on 1 April.
 - Under current restrictions, **travel abroad is prohibited unless there's a legally permitted reason**. Holidays and other leisure purposes are not legally permitted reasons. Keep up to date with [government advice on travelling overseas](#) during the pandemic. The advice changed following emergence of new virus variants with all travel corridors for people arriving in [England](#) and [Scotland](#) suspended from 18 January. Anyone arriving in England must quarantine for 10 days and take two coronavirus tests while in quarantine. If someone has been in a country on the travel ban red list in the 10 days before arrival, they will need to [quarantine in a government-approved hotel](#). Variations in the rules apply in [Wales](#) and [Northern Ireland](#).
 - The [government](#) and [NHS advice](#) is that anyone with certain symptoms (such as a high temperature, a new continuous cough, or a change or loss of sense of smell) must **self-isolate at home for 10 days** from when the symptoms started. You should also self-isolate if you're waiting for a coronavirus test result or have tested positive for the virus, or if you live with someone with symptoms who has tested positive or is waiting for their test result. There is separate NHS Test and Trace advice (see below) if someone has been in contact with a person who has coronavirus.
 - The government has expanded its **COVID-19 testing framework**. The [guidance](#) covers who is eligible, how to get tested and the different types of tests. It offers an employer portal for employers to refer essential workers who are self-isolating because they, or members of their household, have symptoms. There's also an online [self-referral portal](#) for those eligible to apply for a PCR test. In England, the government is keen to increase the availability of rapid workplace testing and any organisation with at least 10 employees can [register interest for free lateral flow tests](#) by a deadline of 15 April. In a widening of the test availability, [everyone in England those without COVID symptoms can access lateral flow tests twice a week](#).

- Under the [NHS Test and Trace](#) system in England, anyone who develops COVID-19 symptoms can be tested, and if they test positive their recent contacts can be traced. There's an app for [England and Wales](#), Northern Ireland has its [StopCOVID NI app](#) and Scotland has the [Protect Scotland app](#). Anyone notified that they've had close recent contact with someone who has tested positive must self-isolate if advised to do so by the Test and Trace service. In such circumstances, employees are entitled to Statutory Sick Pay. The government has published [guidance for workers who are self-isolating](#).
- On 28 September 2020 the government introduced a **legal duty self-isolate**: people in England are required by law to self-isolate if they test positive or are contacted by NHS Test and Trace, or could be liable for a fine. Employers who force or allow staff to come to work when they should be self-isolating will also be liable for fines of up to £10,000.
- The government has published a **COVID-19 recovery strategy**, [Our plan to rebuild](#). The devolved administrations of Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland issued different guidance. The government has also published "**COVID-19 secure**" **guidelines** to help employers manage a safe return to the workplace. People using public transport in all UK nations are required to wear face coverings.
- People's **health and safety remains paramount** during this pandemic and the risk of infection remains, as our [Returning to the workplace guide](#) makes clear. We've worked in partnership with organisations including the Society of Occupational Medicine, Acas, Business in the Community and Mind to produce a [toolkit](#) to guide organisations through taking a holistic approach to managing a safe return to a workplace. Guidance from the Chartered Institute of Ergonomics & Human Factors advises on [creating safe working practices during COVID-19](#).
- We're continuing to urge businesses to ensure they can meet **three key tests** before bringing their people back to a workplace if they can't work from home:
 - **Is it essential?** Employers should engage with their people to understand if returning to the workplace is essential for productivity or wellbeing. If a return is essential, the employer should give clear guidance. Where possible, in keeping with the latest government advice, the employer should continue to support working from home - in the short term while significant health risks and legitimate concerns for safety remain, and in the longer term as part of more flexible ways of working for the future.
 - **Is it sufficiently safe?** Employers have a duty of care to identify and manage risks to ensure that the workplace is sufficiently safe to return to. This could include reconfiguring workspaces and common areas to allow appropriate

social distancing, possible changes to working hours, and increased workplace cleaning and sanitation measures.

- **Is it mutually agreed?** Our research found that four in ten people are anxious about returning to work. It's vital that there is a clear dialogue between employers and employees so concerns can be raised and individual needs and worries taken into account. To manage some of these issues, there will need to be flexibility on both sides to accommodate different working times or schedules.
- The government has introduced a package of measures to support businesses and workers during the pandemic:
 - The **Coronavirus Job Retention Scheme** (CJRS) - also known as the furlough scheme - has been extended again and now runs until 30 September 2021. It allows UK employers to access a financial subsidy worth up to 80% of their workers' wage costs up to a cap of £2,500 per worker per month; employers' contributions will increase gradually (to 10% of employees' wages in July and 20% in August and September). There's guidance on claiming employees' wages through the scheme. Businesses have flexibility to bring furloughed employees back to work on a part-time basis or furlough them full-time, and currently only need to cover National Insurance and employer pension contributions. HMRC has guidance for claimants.
 - **Small business grants, business rate holidays for some sectors and other targeted grants and loan facilities**, including a further grant for businesses in retail, hospitality and leisure announced in January 2021. Find out what financial business support measures are available in the various UK nations.
 - A **Self-Employed Income Support Scheme** comprising a direct cash grant was extended by the Chancellor in the 2021 Budget with a fourth and fifth grant available.
 - On 2 September, the government announced a new '**Kickstart Scheme**' in Great Britain to fund 6-month work placements aimed at 16 to 24 year olds who are on Universal Credit and deemed to be at risk of long-term unemployment. The Chancellor's 2021 Budget announced the doubling of the cash incentive to firms who take on an apprentice (of any age) to a £3,000 payment per hire.

Look after people's health, safety and

wellbeing

Employees' health, safety and wellbeing during this pandemic should continue to be paramount. Employers have a statutory duty of care for people's health and safety, and to provide a safe place to work, but there's also a strong moral responsibility to ensure that employees feel safe and secure in their employment. Employers need to be proactive to protect their people and minimise the risk of the virus spreading. Employers' duty of care for the health and safety of their employees includes anyone who is working remotely.

Government guidance states that employers should not force anyone into an unsafe workplace. Where working from home is not possible, employers should make every possible effort to comply with the social distancing guidelines set out by the government and carry out a thorough COVID-19 risk assessment.

The success of the national vaccination programme so far is very encouraging and will help to reduce infection. However, few people of working age have so far been vaccinated and employers must continue to follow other COVID-secure guidance. Communicate clearly to employees that they still need to take basic hygiene precautions, such as effective hand-washing to help reduce the spread of the virus. Follow official public health and medical advice closely and advise them on what to do if they think they may have caught the virus, or are at risk of contracting it. If you've shifted your workforce to home working, make sure you keep in touch with people and look out for their wellbeing as it can be an isolating experience. Encourage managers to have supportive one-to-ones with people and set up virtual team meetings.

Self-isolation, shielding, and Statutory Sick Pay (SSP)

Many people needed to 'shield' if classed as 'clinically extremely vulnerable', or self-isolate if at risk of infection or returning from a non-exempt country (also called quarantine), based on official guidance. There's more on how employers should handle a self-isolation period for employees in our Protecting your workforce FAQs.

At the start of the pandemic, the government announced a range of new measures around SSP. If an employee or worker needs to self-isolate, they are entitled to SSP. This includes individuals who have been told to self-isolate by a doctor or NHS 111, those who have COVID-19, or who have the symptoms, or if someone in their household has symptoms. It also applies to people caring for those in the same household who display COVID-19 symptoms and have been told to self-isolate. It does **not** apply to employees who are returning from a non-exempt country.

The government has made Statutory Sick Pay available from day one (instead of from day four) for those affected by coronavirus when self-isolating. Employers with fewer than 250

employees can claim a refund for COVID-19 related SSP costs (up to two weeks per employee). There's an [online portal](#) for SMEs to claim the rebate. In August, the [government announced](#) that people on low incomes who need to self-isolate and are unable to work from home in areas with high incidence of COVID-19 can claim a new payment.

Shielding for 'clinically extremely vulnerable' people came to an end on 31 March in England but these individuals are still advised to take extra precautions and work from home where possible. There's different advice for protection of these people in [Scotland](#), [Wales](#) and [Northern Ireland](#).

Medical evidence for SSP

Employees can self-certify for the first seven days, as normal. Government advice is that employers should use discretion around the need for medical evidence beyond that for absence where an employee has to self-isolate in the current exceptional circumstances. The government has introduced a temporary alternative to the fit note for the duration of the COVID-19 outbreak whereby those in self-isolation can obtain a notification via [NHS 111](#) to use as evidence for absence from work. Employers can check if an isolation note is valid using an [online service](#).

An alternative option to providing sick pay is to allow people who are asked to self-isolate, but are not unwell, to work from home wherever possible, and continue to pay as normal.

Many organisations are treating sickness absence related to COVID-19 (including that due to people self-isolating) outside of their normal sickness [absence reporting system](#). Over the coming months some employees may need to self-isolate multiple times (for example, until they receive a negative test result for the virus) and should not be unfairly penalised as part of a trigger system that uses trigger points to highlight absence patterns that could be of concern.

Schools

In England, all schools re-opened for face-to-face teaching from 8 March, supported by twice-weekly testing of pupils. There are various ways that parents and carers can continue to access [childcare](#). Different arrangements apply in [Wales](#), [Scotland](#) and [Northern Ireland](#).

Employers should consider flexible approaches to how people can carry out their role – there's more on the options employers could consider in our [Business continuity FAQs](#).

Wider health and wellbeing concerns

- Reassure employees if they have concerns about the risk of infection, and keep them well informed about your organisation's policies and contingency plans, particularly in relation to the specific guidelines for employees who have been in contact with an infected person or have symptoms of the virus.
- People professionals and employers need to be aware that some people who contract COVID-19 may experience ongoing long-term symptoms, broadly known as 'Long COVID', even if they initially had a mild illness. More research is needed to understand the illness, but organisations need to provide support for any employees experiencing long-term health impacts, including educating line managers about the condition, adjustments to working hours, phased return to work, and access to occupational health and/or counselling services if needed. We've worked in partnership with Society of Occupational Medicine and other organisations to produce advice on recovering from Long COVID and returning to work.
- Make sure everyone, including managers, understands which sick pay and leave policies apply and how these will be implemented. Actively communicate this advice with your people, customers and suppliers.
- Implement an internal communication strategy so that employees are aware of measures being taken to manage the situation in your organisation. Understand that some people may have real concerns about catching the virus, while others may have worries about family or friends in a higher-risk group. It's important to strike the balance between your organisation and its people being prepared for the significant spread of the virus whilst reassuring people that there is no need to panic. Ensure that line managers are regularly informed about the organisation's contingency and return-to-work plans and how to discuss the situation with any concerned employees. They also need to know and where to signpost people to for further advice or support, including employee assistance programmes and/or counselling if they are anxious.
- Promote the resources you have available to support people's health and wellbeing generally, including those through an employee assistance programme. If large numbers of people are now working from home where this is possible, provide ongoing support and communications. Some could start to feel socially isolated and/or anxious about the situation. Make sure you listen to any concerns, and that they take care of their mental wellbeing. Supporting employees' mental wellbeing is crucial whether or not people are attending a place of work or continuing to work from home indefinitely. We've worked with the Society of Occupational Medicine and the Royal College of Psychiatrists to produce a Sustaining work-related mental health post-COVID-19 toolkit.

- The risk of infection from the virus remains as real as it ever was, so be prepared to increase the level of support you provide to staff. Keep in mind anyone who may be more at risk due to being clinically vulnerable, and/or due to a pre-existing health condition, or disability, ethnicity, age, or pregnancy, and be aware of the additional duties you have as an employer to these specific groups of employees.

Develop flexible resourcing plans

- As part of your contingency plan, introduce more flexible resourcing strategies to maintain essential services or production in case of staffing shortages due to people becoming ill and/or self-isolating. If roles can't be performed at home and are essential, consider more innovative resourcing solutions that may need to be deployed, such as split shifts to cover essential operations or services.
- Include provision for hybrid working to help facilitate a safe return to workplaces when the time is right – our research shows that post-pandemic, the majority of workers want to continue to work from home at least some of the time, presenting new opportunities for organisations to establish new ways of working. Hybrid working also provides other opportunities for organisations in terms of reducing estate and facilities costs, enabling employee wellbeing and supporting diversity and inclusion.
- Carry out a resourcing risk assessment of the organisation, identifying essential areas of the business where few employees have the required skills. Consider training additional employees in these skills, particularly if you have furloughed some employees. Ensure that procedures are developed to ensure smooth handovers for employees who are filling in for colleagues in unfamiliar roles. It may be necessary to provide additional training and a risk assessment if individuals are moving to roles where there may be a health and safety risk.
- Identify key services and roles that are essential and can't be put on hold, as well as projects or roles that could be temporarily stood down. Identify those individuals and managers who have transferrable skills, who can fulfil more than one function and could be allocated to more essential roles.
- Maximise the use of technology to facilitate remote contact, for example, video conferencing to facilitate remote meetings. For customer-facing organisations, consider introducing or maximising the use of self-service options and online services. Issue staff with laptops and IT support so they can work remotely wherever possible. Support their health and safety, for example by carrying out risk assessments using self-completion questionnaires that can be completed remotely.

- Increased sickness absence may create a need for other employees, if willing, to work longer hours to keep your business going. If this happens, you will need to comply with the [Working Time Regulations 1998](#) to ensure appropriate length of daytime working hours, night shifts and rest breaks. The government has [changed the rules on carrying over annual leave](#) to support key industries during COVID-19 so workers who haven't taken all their statutory annual leave will be able to carry it over into the next two leave years.
- If your operations are severely affected, consider introducing a voluntary special leave policy on a temporary basis whereby individuals can opt to take paid or unpaid leave. Be mindful that there could be some employees who are willing to take additional time off and welcome a break, but others may struggle financially if they lose pay. Consider offering a shorter working week or other flexible resourcing arrangements, and communicate the business reasons to employees.

Useful contacts and further reading

Contacts

[UK Government – Coronavirus latest information and advice](#)

[UK Government - Coronavirus work and financial support](#)

[Scottish Government – Coronavirus in Scotland](#)

[Welsh Government - Coronavirus](#)

[Northern Ireland - Coronavirus](#)

[National Health Service - Coronavirus \(COVID-19\)](#)

[Acas – Coronavirus advice for employers and employees](#)

[World Health Organization - Coronavirus disease \(COVID-19\) outbreak](#)

Books and reports

DEPARTMENT OF HEALTH AND SOCIAL CARE. (2020) [Coronavirus action plan](#). London: DHSC.

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Journal articles

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CHURCHILL, F. (2020) *Staff anxiety the biggest coronavirus challenge for businesses, survey finds*. *People Management* (online). 20 March.

CHURCHILL, F. (2021) *Can employers force their staff to have the Covid vaccine?* *People Management* (online). 25 February.

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OWEN, J. (2020) *Majority of employees want to work from home for most of the week, research finds*. *People Management* (online). 11 September.

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Explore more on the [People Management coronavirus hub](#).

This factsheet was last updated by Rachel Suff.