

COVID-19 (coronavirus)

Questions and answers for Health and Social Care Staff

Staff from across Health and Social Care have pulled together to help tackle the COVID-19 (coronavirus) outbreak preparations and continue to work tirelessly to ensure that our patients, clients, staff and public are as safe as possible. It is only through the ongoing teamwork of our HSC staff across our services that we will be able to tackle the spread of COVID-19 (coronavirus).

The following questions and answers are set out below to advise and guide staff regarding important employment related issues. The situation relating to COVID-19 (coronavirus) is continually evolving and therefore these questions and answers will be subject to ongoing review and amendment as appropriate.

General information:

1. What is COVID-19 (coronavirus)?

Coronaviruses are a large family of viruses that are common across the world. These viruses can cause mild symptoms ranging from a fever and cough to more serious conditions such as severe pneumonia, shortness of breath and breathing difficulties.

In December 2019, a new strain of coronavirus (COVID-19) was first identified in Wuhan City, Hubei, China. This virus has now spread to other countries. The UK Chief Medical Officers have declared the risk to the public to be moderate. But the risk to individuals remains low.

2. What are the signs and symptoms of COVID-19?

The following symptoms may develop in the 14 days after exposure to someone who has COVID-19 (coronavirus) infection:

- cough;
- difficulty breathing;
- fever.

Generally, these infections can cause more severe symptoms in people with weakened immune systems, older people, and those with long-term conditions like diabetes, cancer and chronic lung disease.

3. What do I need to be aware of in relation to patient/client confidentiality and COVID-19?

The usual strict staff obligations in respect of patient/client confidentiality apply in the context of possible or confirmed diagnosis of COVID-19 (coronavirus). This duty extends to protecting the confidentiality of staff who are being treated as possible or confirmed COVID-19 (coronavirus) patients.

Health, support and self-isolation:

4. **My symptoms match those of COVID-19 (coronavirus). What should I do?**

People who have travelled to certain areas are considered to be at increased risk of COVID-19 (coronavirus) infection, see www.pha.site/covid19-specified-areas

If you are showing symptoms you should follow the advice at www.pha.site/Coronavirus

You must also contact Occupational Health and your line manager immediately **by telephone** to advise of your symptoms and recent travel.

5. **If I contract COVID-19 (coronavirus) and have to take time off work sick as a result, will it affect my sickness record?**

No, in order to mitigate any risks of COVID-19 (coronavirus) spreading across the organisation it is important that infected staff do not come into the workplace. Sickness absence related to COVID-19 (coronavirus) will not form part of any absence triggers, and will not be viewed as such in relation to a member of staff's sickness absence record. COVID-19 (coronavirus) sickness will be recorded in the normal way by managers, using a specific code on HRPTS, but this is strictly to allow us to monitor and report on the impact of absence(s) across the organisation.

6. **When should I return to work after becoming infected with COVID-19 (coronavirus)?**

You must not return to work until 14 days after your return from an affected area. Prior to returning you should contact Occupational Health and they will advise you and your manager on your fitness for work or any relevant alternative arrangements.

7. **Can I continue to work if I am pregnant?**

Yes. Pregnant women should engage in the same preventive measures as other staff to avoid infection like washing hands often and using PPE as required. You may wish to inform your line manager and Occupational Health of your pregnancy.

8. **A family member has just had a positive diagnosis of COVID-19 (coronavirus). I don't have any symptoms but I don't want to come in to work in case I infect someone else. What should I do?**

You should contact Occupational Health and they will advise you and your line manager on your fitness for work or the need for alternative working arrangements or special leave if there is a potential risk of onwards infection.

9. **Will there be a vaccine for the pandemic and will it be available to staff?**

There is currently no vaccine to prevent COVID-19 (coronavirus) but work is ongoing to develop this.

10. **Will the seasonal flu vaccine also be available?**

Yes. It is recommended that as many staff as possible avail of this as it protects against seasonal flu and may help clarify the diagnosis if you were to become unwell with flu-like symptoms.

11. **Where can I get support if I have concerns about my health?**

You can find the latest advice at pha.site/coronavirus. You should discuss your concerns with your line manager and Occupational Health in the first instance particularly if there are circumstances which might put you at higher risk.

Caring responsibilities and leave:

12. I have heard that schools and nurseries may close. I will have real childminding difficulties if this happens. What provision will Health and Social Care make for staff in these circumstances?

The closure of schools is a measure that may be taken by schools in an attempt to limit the spread of COVID-19 (coronavirus). While schools will be responsible for making this decision, parents should at least start to consider alternative options for childcare if this were to happen.

Your organisation's normal provision for Time Off for Dependents will apply in these circumstances.

- You should contact your line manager to explain your difficulties and to request paid time off to arrange alternative childcare arrangements. Based on your circumstances, line managers will have the discretion to agree reasonable time off for you to make alternative arrangements.
- Your line manager will try to ascertain and agree with you what alternative working arrangements could apply, for example working at evenings, working from home etc. You should be prepared to be as flexible as possible given the exceptional nature of the circumstances and the need to ensure that essential services can be maintained.
- If, despite having made efforts, you are unable to arrange alternative childcare or work alternative working patterns or times, then consideration of any further time absence from work beyond a maximum of three days should be taken as time owing or annual leave.

Similar arrangements would apply in the event of any break down in caring arrangements for any other dependent.

13. Will I be paid if I have to self-isolate?

If you are required to self-isolate as per Occupational Health you will receive special paid leave.

14. I have annual leave booked – will my annual leave be cancelled?

It is important to remember that staffing levels could be depleted significantly, either due to staff being absent to care for dependents or being themselves infected with the virus. One way of increasing the available pool of staff for managers will be to review those staff who have been granted annual leave and ask them to change arrangements if possible.

While taking into consideration your own individual wellbeing and the need for you to have a break from work, your manager may ask you to postpone your leave. Remember that where holidays have been booked which involve travel to other countries, restrictions may be placed on travel outside of Northern Ireland by Government.

You should discuss your leave arrangements with your line manager.

Employee concerns and redeployment:

15. Can I refuse to provide services to a patient or client who has COVID-19 (coronavirus)?

The HSC takes very seriously the health of its staff. You should discuss your concerns with your line manager and Occupational Health in the first instance particularly if there are circumstances which might put you at higher risk. However you are generally expected to undertake your normal duties, taking all precautions as specified in relation to infection control measures.

16. How do I ensure I am protected if a patient or client is suspected of or confirmed as having contracted COVID-19 (coronavirus)?

You will be fully briefed and trained on the use of Personal Protective Equipment (PPE) and managers have a responsibility to ensure appropriate PPE is in place for you. Wearing of PPE can be tiring for staff and therefore you and your manager should ensure that you receive adequate rest breaks to avoid fatigue. You must practise and role model hand hygiene measures, and ensure you follow PHA guidance relating to 'Catch it, Bin it, Kill it'.

17. Am I likely to be redeployed?

Services during an emergency may be reduced to the provision of essential care, and therefore some services are very likely to be suspended. Depending on your existing skills and competencies, you may be redeployed to ensure the provision of essential services.

Provided that it does not compromise infection control, you may be requested to relocate as necessary, taking your personal and health circumstances into account and ensuring terms and conditions are adhered to including excess mileage.

18. If I am to be redeployed I am worried about how I will know what to do in a different role. Will I receive training?

Consideration will be given to what is reasonable redeployment and yes, necessary induction and where appropriate relevant training will take place to enable you to take on different duties, however please be assured that you will only be asked to take on tasks within your competence. Where you are working outside your normal role, you should be very mindful of the need to work within your scope of competence and not undertake work which you are not trained or competent to do.

19. If I, as a result of agreed temporary redeployment, am undertaking work of a lower band in another area, will my terms and conditions be protected and will I receive mileage expenses?

Yes, your terms and conditions will be protected if you work in another area during your contracted hours and you will receive mileage payments as appropriate.

20. I am afraid I might get infected with COVID-19 (coronavirus) and pass it on to my family. Do I have to come into work?

The HSC is mindful of the increased anxiety levels of staff during an outbreak and of staff being fearful of putting themselves or their family at risk. However you are required to be at work unless there is a clear health risk which would prevent you from doing so.

Travel:

21. What is the advice on travel to or from affected areas?

The HSC does not issue travel advice, if you're concerned about the impact of the COVID-19 outbreak on your existing travel plans, check with your airline, tour operator, cruise line or other transport and accommodation providers as applicable. People who plan to travel should check the Foreign and Commonwealth Office (FCO) travel advice at www.gov.uk/guidance/travel-advice-novel-coronavirus

22. I'm planning to travel in the next few weeks, is that okay?

Staff planning to travel should carefully consider travel plans. Because the situation is changeable, we cannot guarantee what countries may have restrictions, or what procedures will be in place on returning to Northern Ireland.

We strongly advise that you follow FCO travel advice at www.gov.uk/guidance/travel-advice-novel-coronavirus

23. I've recently returned from travelling out of Northern Ireland, what should I do?

Please check the latest advice at pha.site/covid19-specified-areas. If you have travelled from an affected area you should inform your line manager and Occupational Health before returning to work. Please check the latest advice at www.pha.site/covid19-specified-areas

