

Coronavirus

Your top 10 HR questions answered

New cases of coronavirus are reported daily and the virus has now spread to Europe. So far, only [15 people](#) in the UK have tested positive out of over 7,000 who have been tested. But those figures are bound to increase and the [UK Chief Medical Officers have raised the risk to the UK from low to moderate](#).

We set out answers to the most frequently asked questions we've received from our clients about the coronavirus.

1 What restrictions have the UK government put in place for people who have travelled to/from an "at risk" country?

That depends on the country they have visited. Current government guidance recommends that if the country (or province) falls into **Category 1**, travellers should self-isolate, even if they don't have any symptoms, and call NHS 111 to inform of them of their recent travel. This applies to Wuhan city and Hubei Province in China, Iran, Daegu or Cheongdo in the Republic of Korea and any Italian town under containment measures.

If the country or province falls into **Category 2**, travellers don't need to undertake any special measures, but if they develop symptoms they should self-isolate and call NHS 111. This applies to Cambodia, other areas of China, Hong Kong, northern Italy not subject to containment measures, Japan, Laos, Macau, Malaysia, Myanmar, other areas of the Republic of Korea, Singapore, Taiwan, Thailand and Vietnam.

The government publishes frequent updates and further advice is available [here](#).

Cases have also been confirmed in Spain, Austria, Switzerland, Tenerife and Croatia, but as yet, these countries have not been added to Category 2. We are also aware of informal reports from clients that there may be other outbreaks in other European countries which are yet to be confirmed. We therefore recommend that you regularly review the Category 1 and 2 lists.

Any person who has been in contact with someone with the virus should call NHS 111 even if they feel perfectly well.

2 What should we do if we suspect that an employee has coronavirus?

Symptoms of coronavirus are similar to other flu type illnesses and include a cough, high temperature and difficulty breathing. If you believe they have been in contact with someone with the virus, or they have recently returned from one of the "at risk" countries mentioned above, the [government advice](#) is to:

Call NHS 111, or 999 in an emergency (if they are seriously ill or injured or their life is at risk), and if appropriate, explain which country they have returned from in the last 14 days. People who become unwell should be advised not to go to their GP, pharmacy, urgent care centre or a hospital.

Whilst you wait for advice from NHS 111 or an ambulance to arrive, try to find somewhere safe for the unwell person to sit which is at least 2 metres away from other people. If possible, find a room or area where they can be isolated behind a shut door, such as a staff office or meeting room. If it is possible to open a window, do so for ventilation. They should avoid touching people, surfaces and objects and be advised to cover their mouth and nose with a disposable tissue when they cough or sneeze and put the tissue in the bin. If no bin is available, put the tissue in a bag or pocket for disposing in a bin later. If you don't have any tissues available, they should cough and sneeze into the crook of their elbow. The room will need to be cleaned once they leave.

If they need to go to the bathroom whilst waiting for medical assistance, they should use a separate bathroom if available.

If the individual hasn't been in contact with anyone with the virus and hasn't travelled to one of the "at risk" countries, you can deal with their illness in the normal way.

If they are worried they may have the virus, advise them to call NHS 111 and keep you informed.

3 Can we insist that an employee suspected of having coronavirus should self-quarantine for 14 days?

That depends on their symptoms and whether they have recently travelled from one of the affected countries. Check up to date government advice. Is the country one of those included in Category 1 (see question 1 above)? If so, you can insist that they self-isolate for the recommended period. If they attempt to return to work, you can send them home.

You also have a duty to ensure the health and safety of all your employees. Therefore, if an employee exhibits the symptoms of this virus, you should ask them to go home and ring NHS 111 to obtain further advice.

If the individual is tested for the virus and the result is negative, they will be advised about returning to work. It is perfectly acceptable to ask to see a copy of this advice before they return.

If the test is positive, you will be contacted by the local Public Health England Health Protection Team to discuss the case, identify people who have been in contact with them and advise on any actions or precautions you need to take to protect others in your workplace.

We also recommend that you take health and safety advice, carry out appropriate risk assessments and contact your insurers for advice.

4 Do we have to pay anyone who is absent because they are self-isolating or are suspected of having the virus?

If they are sick then you should apply your usual sick pay policy. However, if they aren't ill, but they decide to follow government/health advice and self-isolate, you may not have to pay them unless they have a contractual right to payment (we recommend that you take legal advice and check this point).

If they can work from home, you should pay them as normal.

ACAS has recently published [guidance](#) which states:

There's no legal ("statutory") right to pay if someone is not sick but cannot work because they've:

- *been told by a medical expert to self-isolate*
- *had to go into quarantine.*

But it's good practice for their employer to treat it as sick leave and follow their usual sick pay policy or agree for the time to be taken as holiday. They could then spread the virus, if they have it.

The government has recently [endorsed](#) this approach and said that employers should provide sick pay to staff who self isolate.

However, if you exclude someone from work "just in case" they have the virus you will have to pay them in most circumstances. We recommend that you take advice regarding payment arrangements.

5 Can we ask employees to provide cover for those who are ill or in quarantine?

Yes, provided the employee agree or you can rely on a contractual term in their contracts of employment. You must act reasonably and find out which employees can work extra hours so that you can plan cover.

You must make sure that any employees working additional hours (whether paid or unpaid) take proper rest breaks (including an 11 hour daily rest period) and don't work in excess of 48 hours each week (averaged over a 17 week period) unless they have signed a Working Time Opt Out Agreement.

6 Do we need to take special measures to protect employees that are most at risk if they are exposed to coronavirus?

All employers have a duty to ensure the health and safety of their employees and to provide a safe place and system of work.

Current advice is that coronavirus causes more severe symptoms in people with weakened immune systems, older people, and those with long-term conditions like diabetes, cancer and chronic lung disease. You will need to identify anyone that is potentially at risk and decide what steps you need to take to protect them if the numbers of cases in the UK increase, or you have

anyone who has tested positive for the virus or is suspected of having it. This might include allowing employees to work from home (if their role lends itself to this), giving them different work to do so they can work from home, or from a different location, asking them to take paid leave or paying them if there is no work available for them to do. You need to adopt a consistent approach regarding paid leave/holiday.

You also have special duties in respect of pregnant and breastfeeding workers. You must conduct a risk assessment if working conditions could involve risk to new or expectant mothers or their babies. If your assessment identifies risk, you are expected to take steps to reduce it. Ultimately, if there is no other way of alleviating the risk (such as assigning them to a different role) you may have to suspend on full pay. Previous guidance from the NHS advised that the risk of infection can be reduced if pregnant women avoid unnecessary travel and crowds.

7 Do we have to shut our workplace if an employee is diagnosed with coronavirus?

Not unless you have been advised to. Your local Public Health England Health Protection Team will contact you and conduct a risk assessment. They will discuss the case, identify people who have been in contact with them and provide advice about any actions or precautions you need to take.

The Health Protection Team will also advise you about the cleaning of communal areas such as meeting rooms and toilets.

This advice may change if more cases are confirmed in the UK. It has been reported that the chief medical officer, Professor Chris Whitty has indicated that one option to try and control the spread of the virus is to restrict travel which will impact on anyone commuting to work. It's therefore sensible to make a contingency plan if you do have to close down your workplace or operate via a skeleton staff.

8 How can we reduce the risk to our employees?

The risk level is currently identified as moderate. We recommend that you publish guidance encouraging employees to be extra-vigilant with washing their hands, using and disposing of tissues etc.

If you have the capacity to do so, it may be worth designating an "isolation room" where an

employee who feels ill can go and sit away from the rest of the company and privately call "111" before taking any further necessary action.

9 Can we prevent staff travelling abroad on holiday?

No, you can't prevent someone travelling on holiday to areas that are considered to be high risk. However, you can advise against travel to certain areas, reiterate government guidance and ask employees to notify you if they are intending to travel to affected areas.

We also recommend that you explain what will happen if a member of staff travels to an area that is affected, such as whether they will/may need to self isolate, whether they will be paid etc in line with your policy.

10 Where do we find up to date information?

The government publishes [daily updates](#) at 2 pm with the latest stats and advice.

Need more information?

Please speak to [Helen Dyke](#) if you'd like to discuss how we can help you.

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