

Reopening your business and COVID-19

Everyone has been bombarded with information about COVID-19 and how serious a major outbreak could be for the community and for business. Tai Tokerau – Northland is no exception. With a change in level of pandemic response, we all now need to consider the responsibilities you will have, for both staff and customers, when your business starts up again.

The Health and Safety at Work Act 2015 requires that employers take all practicable steps to mitigate risk and protect workers at all times from workplace hazards.

During a pandemic response, the risk of being infected with Covid-19 is considered a workplace hazard.

There are a number of interventions you can and should take as an employer to reduce risks. Outlined below is a framework summary you could use as an initial guide which has been compiled through reference to publications, reference sites, and our company Physician. Get staff involved – they may have more practical and simple ideas and if you engage them in the process they will accept changes more readily and they will be more likely to participate in the interventions. A third party can also be helpful in sighting hazards that you might not recognise since you work the environment on a daily basis.

In considering steps that you as an employer should take to protect your workers, it is important to understand the fundamentals of Covid-19:

HOW IT SPREADS

1. Primarily through droplets – ie. From coughing, sneezing.
2. By touching a surface contaminated by droplets and then in turn touching your mouth, nose, eyes.
3. Any close personal contact - with latest advice suggesting closer than 1 metre for more than 15 minutes in a face to face situation, or in an enclosed room.
4. It is still generally believed that spread is greatest when a person has symptoms, but transmission prior to symptoms may be possible.

SYMPTOMS & DIAGNOSIS

Symptoms include:

- Fever (greater than 38C) - 83%-98% of patients
- Coughing, often dry.
- Difficulty breathing or a shortness of breath - 18%-55%
- Temporary loss or disturbance of smell and/or taste - up to 86% of patients
- Sore throat - 5%-17% early in the illness
- Loss of appetite. 40% in a case series.
- Fatigue and/or muscle/joint pain – 26% to 69% (up to 44% for muscle aches)

Less common are symptoms of sneezing and runny nose, conjunctivitis, headache, dizziness, chest pain, vomiting and diarrhoea.

Diagnosis

People with symptoms are diagnosed by having a sample taken from their nose or throat. This sample is then tested in a hospital laboratory for parts of the COVID-19 virus. The test presently takes 2-3 days to come back. Other than GPs, private health practices like StaffCare cannot take tests.

Illness

The illness in three stages:

Stage 1: an asymptomatic incubation period : around 98% of patients will develop symptoms within 11.5 days of infection.

Stage 2: non-severe, flu type illness for most people with recovery at home

Stage 3: severe respiratory symptomatic stage* for a smaller number of people who may need to be admitted to hospital for care.

*Severe illness is more common in people who are over the age of 70 and/or have underlying health problems. Underlying health problems does not mean you are more likely to will contract Covid-19.

There are a number of interventions you can take as an employer to reduce the risk of workplace transmission. Outlined below are some of these:

MINIMISING THE RISK OF COVID-19 INFECTION IN YOUR WORKPLACE

Essential practices :

- ✓ ***No one, with even mild illness symptoms, should come to work.*** Seek medical attention early if symptomatic by calling the COVID Healthline on 0800 3585453. Testing for COVID-19 is available at Community Testing Centres around Northland.
- ✓ Good personal hygiene is key. Washing hands with soap and water for at least 20 seconds and drying hands OR using an alcohol-based hand sanitiser: before eating or touching food; when using the bathroom; after coughing or sneezing; if caring for sick people
- ✓ Good cough etiquette - cough into elbow and or tissues – with safe disposal of tissues.
- ✓ Getting immunised against other infectious diseases such as influenza.

Operational Controls (changing the way people work):

- ✓ Plan and communication infection prevention expectations with all staff.
- ✓ Implement a formal regime of asking each staff member on a daily basis about illness symptoms. Sign In/Out registers and contact register is important to be maintained.
- ✓ Reinforce leave availability for illness.
- ✓ Educate staff on the risk factors and mitigation activity. Get them involved if possible.
- ✓ Consider all possible options to optimise physical distancing in the workplace.
- ✓ Minimise worker contact and close contact with clients and customers.
- ✓ Continue to encourage staff to work from home if possible.
- ✓ If you supply protective equipment, make sure staff know how to put it on and how to use it appropriately. For respirators, ensure they have been fit tested recently.
- ✓ Walk around your premises room by room (ie. Waiting room, lunch room, meeting room, etc) and identify this risks of social distance and hygiene.

Physical controls (isolate people from the hazard):

- ✓ 1m (or more if possible) between workers.
- ✓ Clean and disinfect surfaces frequently (at least daily e.g., light switches, doorknobs, countertops, handles, phones).
- ✓ Maintain good ventilation
- ✓ Discourage sharing of tools and equipment, if practical.

Be Kind “*He aroha whakato, he aroha puta mai*”, *If kindness is sown, then kindness you shall receive.*

- ✓ Look out for your staff’s mental health and well-being. StaffCare can assist with planning around this if needed.
- ✓ Employers need to demonstrate compassion even if under extreme stress themselves.
- ✓ Keep asking about staff’s workload and offer support where possible – do not assume things are the same at work or at home as what it was prior to lock-down. Managers should be instructed to be alert for signs of stress, anxiety or mood changes.
- ✓ Consider flexible working hours if possible, especially where a staff member has dependants.
- ✓ It is important that consideration be given to those who have caring responsibilities (elderly or sick family members).

Use of Personal Protective Equipment (PPE – mask, gloves, face shields, clothing).

This is generally accepted as the least effective of the controls, but does have a place if available and used appropriately:

- ✓ Only required for some workers (as per Ministry of Health for Workplaces):
- ✓ Facemasks and gloves are not recommended if you can maintain separation from workers with potential symptoms of COVID-19.
- ✓ Consider glove-use for workers who touch surfaces or items touched by others e.g. Supermarket workers.
- ✓ Frequent hand washing and physical distancing must still be maintained.
- ✓ For workers that are unable to maintain physical separation from potentially infected individuals - facemasks and gloves are recommended.

It is important that PPE is:

- Properly worn; if not then it may be a hazard in itself.
- Regularly inspected, maintained, and replaced, as necessary.
- Properly removed, cleaned, and stored or disposed of.

- Other controls are maintained.
- Some PPE (respirators) requires fit testing – please let us know if this is needed and we can advise and/or arrange this. StaffCare has the latest equipment.

If an employer runs out of essential PPE they may need to stop specific work activities until supplies become available.

Summary : Things for you to consider looking forward...

- ✓ The situation and recommendations may well change frequently as time, knowledge and 'best-practice' understanding increases. StaffCare's points and advice outlined in this document is based on a compilation of recommendations and evidence from numerous sources at the time of writing. The NZ Ministry of Health website is the best site for keeping up to date.
- ✓ You need to be responsive to the situation for your specific workplace and the risks COVID-19 may present and be able to demonstrate that you have taken all practical steps to mitigate risks. Your solutions should not create a greater risk for your staff. This document is not a template or checklist, it is conveyed to encourage you to consider the risks at your workplace and put your own plan together. Contact StaffCare if you would like to book a 'site visit'.
- ✓ Speak to your neighbours; Northland is a community at home and at work– speak to your neighbouring business, they may have space or facilities to help you minimise risks you identify and likewise you may be able to help them.
- ✓ Try and be methodical and practical in your approach to going back to work. Write a 'to do list' and note ideas that you may have at random times. Keep a record of what you have done. Be responsive and inclusive to staff. Be safe without being paranoid. Northland has been fortunate in that we have had a very low level of community transmission. Remaining positive and optimistic while operating in a cautious yet practical manner will continue to see the situation for us all continue to improve.
- ✓ Think whether if it is actually best for your business to start up with a 'big beautiful bang'. In some situations it may be better to phase a return to work and the numbers of staff that physically turn up (perhaps even just a day or so) until you feel comfortable your workplace is as safe as possible.

How can StaffCare help your business:

Site Visit : A third party can be helpful and provide clarity in sighting hazards that you might not recognise since you work the environment on a daily basis. StaffCare is available to come to your premises to assist you in identifying issues and potential solutions. After a site visit, we can then offer you a tailored plan for your organisation that can be adjusted as we move into different response levels of the COVID-19 pandemic.

'Back to Work' Employee 'COVID-19 Risk Assessment: We have developed an online questionnaire that can be sent to your staff via email to complete prior to return to work to determine risk. We may also be able to provide onsite temperature checks for returning staff depending on demand and nurse availability.

Respirator Fit Testing: StaffCare has the latest technology TSI portacount machine to perform quantitative fit testing. This testing provides less risk of respiratory transmission than the traditional (and generally accepted as less reliable) qualitative testing with a hood and aerosol spray. Fit testing gives you the assurance that your respiratory PPE actually works.

Vaccination: We will let you know the moment we are able to re-commence vaccination of work related health risks and once the Ministry of Health has released vaccination for the general population we will re-commence the flu vaccine clinics. These will likely be held in our Whāngarei clinic with smaller numbers and following distancing protocols outlined above.

Pre Employment: We have developed an 'on-line' pre employment questionnaire to ensure any physical 'contact' is kept to minimum. A prospective employee will still have to visit our clinic, and while some of the typical pre-employment checks (ie. spirometry, hearing) will be deferred until L2 (*or deemed safe to perform*), we can give some assurances for an employer including a drug screening test & temperature check.

Urine Drug Testing: We will be able to commence urine drug testing by booking only.

Advice: We are available to answer questions and to provide advice on employee health risk and well-being.

“E haunui ana i raro, e hari ana i runga” : *It's blustery below but the sky above is clear.*

This whakataukī (proverb) is used in a difficult situation when a difficult period has passed, and the way ahead is now easier. While we acknowledge that it may not feel that things are easier, everything is easier and more successful with a plan.

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