



COVID-19: GETTING YOUR WORKPLACE READY

Introduction

The first cases of an unknown cluster of pneumonia were reported to WHO on 31st December 2019. Since then, it rapidly spread within China and to some countries globally.

On 30th January 2020, WHO declared the outbreak of novel coronavirus in China as a Public Health Emergency of International Concern.

On 3rd March, there were over 89,000 cases and over 3,000 deaths recorded in at least 69 countries and territories. At the end of February, WHO has raised the risk of COVID-19 spreading internationally to 'very high' the highest risk level.

Maldives has been gearing up for preparedness and readiness to detect and respond to COVID-19. Along with public health authorities, the government, businesses and the public have a role in control of this disease. This document is intended for workplaces of all sizes, to guide them in preparing for an outbreak of COVID-19 in Maldives, to help mitigate the outbreak as well as plan for business continuity in the event of an outbreak.

The following guideline have been adapted from WHO and CDC.

About COVID-19

Named COVID-19, the new coronavirus causes respiratory illness in those affected. In more than 80% of affected, the disease is minor, however around 20% can develop severe disease requiring hospitalization. Around 2% of those who are affected, mostly people who are older and have chronic diseases such as diabetes, lung, heart and kidney diseases, die of the disease.

When a person who is infected coughs or exhales, droplets containing the virus is released. Some land on surfaces such as desks, counters, etc. If a person stands in front of an infected person when they cough (less than 2 meters away), the uninfected person may inhale these droplets and get infected. Or if they touch surfaces contaminated with droplets and then touch their nose, mouth or eyes, the infection can be passed onto them.

The mainstay of prevention is respiratory hygiene and handwashing. These maybe low-cost, low-tech measures, but are the most effective.

PREVENING THE SPREAD OF COVID-19 WITHIN THE WORKPLACE

As of 10th March, there are 6 confirmed cases in the Maldives. The following measures will ensure that all employees and customers remain safe.

1- Cleaning the workplace

- Commonly touched surfaces (such as desks, tables, counters, door knobs) and objects (such as telephones, keyboards) should be wiped with regular cleaners. These areas can be cleaned with bleach (1ml bleach:9ml water) or Ethanol.
- More frequent cleaning of public areas such as lifts, toilets and waiting areas
- High-traffic areas should be more frequently cleaned (e.g. counters where customers are converged regularly, workstations used in multiple shifts).
- Areas where large number of public gathers regularly, such as ferry terminals, public transport, schools, airports, and other such places should be cleaned at least twice a day or once every shift.

2- Sick employees to remain at home

- Anyone with respiratory symptoms (runny nose, cough, sore throat or fever should be encouraged to stay at home until symptoms disappear without using fever reducing medications or cough suppressant).
- Ensure your sick leave policies take into account public health guidance and needs.

3- Promote regular handwashing

- Put hand sanitizer bottles or dispensers in prominent places around the workplace, ensure they are regularly refilled. Make sure they are accessible to staff and especially available in areas where there is high flow of staff/customers, e.g. at customer service areas.
- Display handwashing posters at your workplaces.
- Ensure handwashing facilities with soap and water are available, and facilities for hand drying (disposable or air dryers)

4- Promote good respiratory hygiene

- Ensure masks and tissues are available for staff and customers experiencing respiratory systems
- Ensure there are closed bins (ideally foot-operated) with liners for disposing of masks and tissues.
- Use posters advising good respiratory hygiene in common areas.

5- Travel

- Always refer to HPA for advice before taking decision for travel of employees
- Make sure your organization is briefed on the latest global disease situation
- Assess the benefits and risks of travel
- Employees with chronic diseases such as those with diabetes, lung diseases, heart disease, kidney disease should avoid travelling
- While travelling, employees should ensure that they have hand sanitizers on hand and clean hands regularly and stay at least 2m away from those who have respiratory systems
- Ensure employees are familiar with the guidelines and instructions issued by the government of Maldives to prevent and reduce COVID-19. All employees should strictly adhere to all local restrictions and guidelines
- Employees should keep in mind that local conditions at destination might require abrupt measures. Employees can be placed under isolation if a case is identified among their contacts while on the trip.

- After return from travel to a country where cases are seen, employees should monitor their health for 14 days. If they develop fever, cough, cold or breathing difficulty, **call 1676** immediately. Employees are to call even if they develop mild symptoms.

6- Events

- As COVID-19 continues to spread globally and with the situation changing day by day, HPA advice is currently to not hold any events, conferences or any such large gatherings.

GETTING YOUR BUSINESS READY FOR COVID-19

In the event of COVID-19 spreading within Maldives, the following scenarios are likely to happen:

- Businesses may have an employee or customer testing positive, employees who were in contact with them would need to go into isolation for 14 days.
- Majority of staff maybe infected, both these scenarios will result in high absenteeism.
- In a widespread disease scenario, the social distancing measures would come into place, this would mean that even workplaces would be closed (other than essential work).
- Temporary closure of the workplace to deep-clean if an employee or staff becomes positive.

All workplace should develop their own business continuity plans for all the above scenarios. The objectives of the plan would be to:

- Reduce disease transmission among staff.
- Protect those who are at high risk for complications (those with long-term health problems).
- Maintain services/business operations as far as possible, especially if it is an essential service.

The plan should at a minimum:

- Identify a staff responsible (Flu Manager): in the event of staff falling sick, the Flu Manager would be responsible for communicating to staff in the event of an employee becoming sick and liaising with health authorities.
- Have a mechanism to identify, isolate and inform health authorities if an employee with travel history or contact with a case becomes ill while on site.
- Assessment of the essential functions of the business/workplace that needs to continue even if social distancing measures are in place (these would be essential services to the public such as waste collection and management, utilities, communications, health services, necessities such as groceries). This should consider how much the community depends on the functioning of your workplace/ business.
- Assess if the functions can be scaled down, and at what level.
- Have a mechanism for how to maintain functions in case many employees are unable to attend work, due to being in isolation, being infected or having to take care of sick family members. Consider possibility of working from home, for at least some functions. Consider also staggered shifts, rather than keeping all employees together at work at the same time.
- Build mechanism for communicating with employees and record updates daily.
- Consider how the function will be affected if workplace (or one floor or one area of workplace) needs to be closed temporarily for deep-cleaning, in the event that an employee or customer tests positive, and plan accordingly. Deep cleaning may take a day or two, depending on type of establishment and size.
- Procedures for triggering the plan, and informing employees.
- Address the mental health of employees.

Employers should take into consideration the following:

- Ensure all employee contacts and their emergency contacts are up-to-date.
- Consider cross-training to enable more staff to perform critical functions.
- Once the business continuity plan is developed, all employees should be familiar with the plan and know their roles.
- Consider sick leave policies to reflect public health guidance at the time (e.g. not mandate everyone to get medical certificate from doctor if authorities are advising people with symptoms to stay home).

- Make leave policies flexible to adhere to the spirit of public health guidelines, and in line with employment regulations.
- Consider putting information about COVID-19, and information about handwashing and respiratory etiquette on the intranet of the workplace.
- Employers should stay up-to-date on the latest developments of the disease, and the latest public health guidance.
- Some employees may be living in accommodation provided by the employer. In the event of a staff being diagnosed with COVID-19 or being put in isolation, employer must provide suitable arrangements for accommodation in line with public health guidance.

If a suspected person is identified within premises:

- Any employee who shows symptoms during an outbreak or showing symptoms after travel to an area with disease should be isolated in a separate room with door closed.
- No one should use the workstation used by the staff.
- **Inform hotline at 1676 immediately!**