

COVID-19: A Guide for Businesses

March 2, 2020

Many employers and businesses in New Jersey are concerned about the current outbreak of the 2019 Novel Coronavirus (COVID-19) and potential impacts to their business communities and wish to take appropriate steps to mitigate any risks. The Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) is working hard to learn as much as possible about this COVID-19 so that we can better understand how it spreads and characterize its associated illness. The New Jersey Department of Health is also working hard to develop guidance and education materials, in the face of evolving information.

Though the CDC considers COVID-19 to be a serious public health concern based on current information, the immediate health risk to the general U.S. public is considered low at this time. The CDC and the World Health Organization are closely monitoring the national and global situation and providing ongoing guidance. Updated travel information specific to COVID-19 can be found at <https://www.cdc.gov/coronavirus/2019-ncov/travelers/index.html>

The New Jersey Department of Health is providing guidance and resources for businesses which may help prevent workplace exposures to acute respiratory illnesses, including COVID-19. This guidance is, in part, based on new and evolving scientific information available on COVID-19 transmission and the need to limit transmission in our communities.

What is the difference between seasonal and novel coronavirus?

Coronaviruses are a family of viruses and there are different types of coronavirus within that family, much like there are different types of influenza viruses. Coronaviruses, in general, are not new, are quite common and are a frequent cause of respiratory illnesses such as the common cold. Coronaviruses tend to circulate in the fall and winter months, similar to influenza. Most people get infected with these viruses at some point in their lives.

The type of coronavirus that has recently emerged in Wuhan, China **is a new type** of coronavirus and is infecting people for the first time (which means that people do not have any immunity to it). This newly discovered virus is called SARS-CoV-2 and is causing a disease named COVID-19.

What are common symptoms of COVID-19?

Information to date suggests this virus is causing symptoms consistent with a respiratory illness such as cough, fever, and shortness of breath.

How is COVID-19 spread?

At this time, it's unclear how easily or sustainably this virus is spreading between people. Typically, with most respiratory viruses, people are thought to be most contagious when they are most symptomatic (the sickest). Chinese officials report that sustained person-to-person spread in the community is occurring in China. Similar spread has been reported in other countries. Person-to-person spread in the United States has been detected, but the risk to the general public remains low. Cases in healthcare settings, like hospitals, may also occur.

What preventive measures should be taken to help reduce the spread of respiratory viruses?

NJDOH recommends that employers increase education on respiratory hygiene. Individuals should be asked to follow these steps to prevent the transmission of respiratory infections:

- Cover your coughs and sneezes with a tissue or into your sleeve, not your hands.
- Avoid touching your eyes, nose and mouth.
- Wash hands often for at least 20 seconds, especially after coughing or sneezing. Use alcohol-based hand sanitizer if soap and water are not available.
- Stay home from work if you're sick.
- Avoid people who are sick.
- Get a flu shot – it's not too late to be protected.
- Clean and disinfect frequently touched surfaces and objects.

How is COVID-19 treated?

Currently, there is no specific antiviral treatment recommended for the coronavirus. There is no vaccine to prevent this virus, and the CDC advises that the best way to prevent infection is to avoid being exposed to this virus. These include washing hands often with soap and water for at least 20 seconds or using an alcohol-based hand sanitizer if soap and water are not available and avoiding others who are sick.

How should employers prepare for the potential of coronavirus in their business community?

NJDOH suggest carefully reviewing CDC interim guidance for businesses which may help prevent workplace exposures to acute respiratory illnesses, including COVID-19, in non-healthcare settings. The guidance also provides planning considerations if there are more widespread, community outbreaks of COVID-19.

This guidance is available at:

https://www.cdc.gov/coronavirus/2019-ncov/specific-groups/guidance-business-response.html?CDC_AA_refVal=https%3A%2F%2Fwww.cdc.gov%2Fcoronavirus%2F2019-ncov%2Fguidance-business-response.html

To prevent stigma and discrimination in the workplace, the guidance described below should be used to assess risk of COVID-19. Do not make determinations of risk based on race or country of origin and be sure to maintain confidentiality of people with confirmed COVID-19. There is much more to learn about the transmissibility, severity, and other features of COVID-19 and investigations are ongoing.

Can employees that are scheduled to travel abroad still go?

Any person or group planning a trip abroad should consult the CDC website for current travel advisories regarding any travel restrictions. The situation is evolving so travelers should stay up to date with CDC's travel health notices related to this outbreak at <https://www.cdc.gov/coronavirus/2019-ncov/travelers/index.html>. These notices will be updated as more information becomes available.

Do business events need to be canceled?

At this time, there is no need to cancel business or social events. There are no cases of COVID-19 in New Jersey, and there are no restrictions on public gatherings.

If an employee has recently returned from China within the past 14 days, should they be excluded from work?

- Travelers returning from mainland China will undergo a health screening and up to 14 days of self-quarantine with health monitoring to ensure they have not contracted the virus and do not pose a public health risk.
- All asymptomatic (without symptoms) individuals under monitoring must be excluded from work for 14 days from their last date in China.
- Travelers will be asked to self-quarantine and self-monitor as directed by public health recommendations and to seek care if ill.

If an employee has recently traveled abroad, excluding China, should they be excluded from work?

CDC has issued travel advisories for several countries. Details can be found here: <https://wwwnc.cdc.gov/travel>. CDC is not recommending that these individuals be screened or monitored and should not be excluded from work. However, if an employee has traveled to one of the countries listed on this website, they should monitor for the following symptoms for 14 days after their return:

- Fever
- Cough
- Difficulty breathing

If symptoms develop in individuals who are likely to have been exposed to COVID-19 they should:

- Seek medical care right away. Before seeking care at a doctor's office or emergency room, they should call ahead and tell them about recent travel and symptoms.
- Wear a surgical mask while in transit to limit transmission.
- Avoid mass transit when seeking care if possible.
- Cover mouth and nose with a tissue or sleeve (not your hands) when coughing or sneezing.

What should I do if an employee becomes sick while at work?

Employees who appear to have acute respiratory illness symptoms (i.e. cough, shortness of breath) upon arrival to work or become sick during the day should be separated from other employees and be sent home immediately. Sick employees should cover their noses and mouths with a tissue when coughing or sneezing (or an elbow or shoulder if no tissue is available). This is the recommendation whether the employee might have COVID-19 or any of the much more common respiratory viruses.

If a coworker is diagnosed with COVID-19, can I get it from the office environment?

Currently, there are no confirmed cases of COVID-19 in New Jersey. If a coworker was diagnosed with coronavirus, it is most likely the common seasonal coronavirus, not COVID-19 which can only be identified at the state public health laboratory or CDC. Seasonal coronaviruses are spread like any other respiratory illness so precautions like hand hygiene, covering your mouth when coughing or sneezing, staying home when sick, and avoiding sick people are things individuals can do to prevent illness.

Should employees who may have been in contact with someone with coronavirus wear a surgical mask?

There is little need for the general public to wear face masks in the U.S. currently as the threat level is low. But for people who are in close contact with an infected person, a mask may be helpful if used properly. They are not 100% effective as the virus can enter through the sides of the mask or enter the body through the eyes. The CDC does not currently recommend the use of face masks among the general public. While limited person-to-person spread among close contacts has been detected, this virus is not currently spreading in the community in the United States. Surgical masks can help prevent the spread of disease when worn by a sick person.

Are there special recommendations for cleaning?

- Special sanitizing processes beyond routine cleaning is not necessary or recommended to slow the spread of respiratory illness.
- Businesses should follow standard procedures for routine cleaning and disinfecting with an EPA-registered product. Typically, this means daily sanitizing surfaces and objects that are frequently touched.
- Disposable wipes should be provided so that commonly used surfaces, e.g., doorknobs, keyboards, desks, etc. can be wiped down by employees before each use.

Resources

- CDC – General Information Page
 - <https://www.cdc.gov/coronavirus/2019-ncov/index.html>
- CDC – Home Isolation Guide
 - <https://www.cdc.gov/coronavirus/2019-ncov/hcp/guidance-home-care.html>