Government of the Virgin Islands

Prevent and Reduce Transmission Among Employees

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I.   COVID-19 Risks

COVID-19 can be spread at the workplace/occupational setting in two main ways:

- person to person, by people who are in close contact

- by surfaces or objects, when people touch their face with contaminated hands

The key risk factors for COVID-19 transmission include:

- *prolonged exposure* - spending more time with potentially infected people or in a contaminated environment

- *close proximity* - working close to others

- *crowded places* - having more people in a space

- *closed spaces* - indoor spaces with less fresh air (working indoors is riskier than working outdoors)

- *forceful exhalation* – activities that cause people to breath more deeply, such as exercise, speaking loudly and singing

The risk of severe health outcomes is not the same for all workers. The risk increases with age and is higher for people with pre-existing conditions like obesity, diabetes, hypertension and respiratory diseases, like asthma.

Remember that asymptomatic persons; those who do not have symptoms, can also spread COVID-19. It is wise to act as if everyone is infected.

II. Implementing Control Measures

With an infectious disease like COVID-19 control measures must be in place to help protect your workers. Your controls can help break the chain of transmission and reduce the risk of an outbreak.

Employers should implement a variety of measures to control potential exposure to COVID-19. Examples include:

- *screening of employees and visitors*

- *physical distancing and barriers*

- *good ventilation*

- *frequent cleaning and disinfection of surfaces*

- *source control masking:* workers and visitors wear the mask to protect those around them

- *personal protective equipment*

In situations where one or more controls cannot be consistently maintained it is especially important that other controls are in place.

i. Screening

Screening involves an assessment of information about symptoms and interactions that may result in higher risks of transmitting COVID-19. There are two different types of screening:

- *passive screening:* people assess their own risk factors and make the decision themselves

- *active screening:* the results of the screening assessment are reviewed to determine whether a person may enter the workplace

The screening questionnaire should encompass questions about present symptoms and contact with positive cases or clusters.
Sample questions include:

i.   In the last 14 days, have you travelled outside of the British Virgin Islands?

ii. Are you currently experiencing any of these symptoms?

- Fever, digestive issues (e.g., diarrhea), shortness of breath, difficulty breathing, cough, abdominal pains, chills, nose bleeds, joint pains, sore throat, headache, runny nose, loss of taste or smell)

iii. Is anyone you live with currently experiencing any new COVID-19 symptoms and/or waiting for test results after experiencing symptoms?

iv. What is your vaccination status?

Based on the result of the assessment, a decision should be made about whether the person should be excluded from the workplace until they are further assessed and/or symptoms resolve.

ii.   Physical Distancing and barriers

The most effective way to reduce the risk of COVID-19 transmission is to maintain physical distancing of 6 feet.

Where possible, employees should continue to work from home and meet virtually until public health authorities advise otherwise.
To enable workers to maintain a physical distance of at least 6 feet from other people in the workplace, use a variety of engineering and administrative controls such as:

- barriers, such as plexiglass, to maintain separation as a primary means of control

- scheduling and other administrative changes to reduce the number of people who must share the same space including during shifts, lunch and other breaks

- providing adequate space by using and repurposing all available areas inside your facility and in the surrounding outdoor space

iii. Good ventilation

Ventilation is particularly important. The risk of COVID-19 transmission is higher in more enclosed and crowded spaces.

At your workplace please:

- use portable air cleaners

- keep windows and doors open as much as possible, including in hotter weather

- adjust HVAC systems to increase the amount of fresh air and reduce recirculation

- continue ventilation and air exchange after regular business hours

- use available outdoor space whenever possible (for example, for meetings, breaks, client interactions such as curbside pick-up)

iv. Frequent cleaning and disinfection of surfaces

The virus that causes COVID-19 may be transferred to surfaces or objects. Employees can be infected if they touch their face with contaminated hands.

Consider the policies and procedures you can put in place to make sure you are cleaning and disinfecting and keeping the workplace as free of the virus as possible.

The public health recommendation is to clean and disinfect high-touch surfaces at least twice a day. Please consult Environmental Health Department for more guidance on cleaning and disinfecting.
To reduce transmission:

- identify commonly touched surfaces and commonly used areas in your workplace and put into place a schedule to clean and disinfect them

- consider whether there are high-touch surfaces that may need to be cleaned and disinfected more often

- assign tools, equipment and workstations to a single user if possible, or limit the number of users

- regularly clean and disinfect any shared equipment and tools, including between users

v.   Source control masking

Workers, visitors and clients in the workplace must wear a mask to help protect those around them.

They should be worn regardless of vaccination status and especially enforced if you have a high level of unvaccinated employees working in an indoors environment and in areas where physical distancing cannot be maintained.

All employers should use masking combined with other control. They are another layer of protection and should not be used instead of physical distancing, and physical distancing should not be used instead of masks. Both control measures lower risk and should be used together.
Masks should consist of 2 or 3 layers and must be worn properly and consistently.

Encourage clients, customers and visitors to your workplace to wear masks to help protect your employees and to reduce the risk of transmission of COVID-19 in your community.

III. What to do if there is a suspected case or exposure to a case at the workplace

STEP 1: <u>Advise and Isolate</u>

If an employee calls in sick.

If a worker calls in sick, informs you of symptoms associated with Covid-19 or informs you that they were a close contact of a symptomatic confirmed or suspected case, have them remain in isolation and request that they call the Public Health Unit or the Covid-19 Hotline. Emphasize that the worker follows any recommendations given by the officer, including being tested and self-isolating.

Symptomatic at the workplace

If an employee starts to show symptoms in the workplace, they should immediately be asked to return home and self-isolate. If they cannot leave immediately, they should be isolated in another room, away from other employees until they are able to leave the premises.

If the employee is very ill, call 999, the Covid-19 Hotline, Public health and let the officer know that they may have COVID-19.

STEP 2: <u>Immediately contact Public Health.</u>

Contact the Public Health Unit for guidance on what to do if someone develops symptoms at your workplace or you are told one of your employees tested positive for COVID-19. Public health will provide instructions and do contact tracing if needed.

To help support contact tracing, businesses should have a system in place where information about workplace interactions can be immediately be

sent to the Unit. This could include information such as:

- dates and times of interactions

- Persons who work with or came in contact with the affected employee (e.g. visitors/clients)

- Any high risk activities (e.g. group meetings)

- Full names of close contacts

- Contact telephone numbers

- Addresses (for workers)

STEP 3: Please follow public healthdirection

The public health unit may require that:

- other workers who were exposed are notified and sent home to self-isolate, self-monitor and report any possible COVID-19 symptoms

- the workplace be shut down while the affected workplace or area and equipment are disinfected

- other public health measures are implemented

Decontaminate the area that may have been touched by the ill person as soon as possible. Contact Environmental Health for further guidance.

Each situation is different; therefore, specific direction will be provided. Generally, however, workers should self-isolate if they either:

- have symptoms (regardless of vaccination status)

- had close contact with an individual with symptoms or a confirmed diagnosis

Close contacts include people who have spent time less than 6 feet away from the infected person in the same room, workspace, or area without barriers or protective equipment and people living in the same home.

IV. Guidance for vaccinated and unvaccinated contacts

i. Unvaccinated Employees

An unvaccinated employee who had close contact with someone known to have COVID-19 should contact Public Health for an assessment and will be placed under quarantine for 10-14 days from the date of last contact.

During their quarantine period, they will be sent a daily symptom monitoring sheet to track their progress.

At the end of their quarantine period, they will be tested on day 13 or 14 and if negative allowed to return to work and other activities.

This test will be arranged by their designated Public Health Officer. Neither the employer nor the employee should arrange for their test.

ii. Vaccinated Employees

Vaccinated & symptomatic

A fully vaccinated employee who had close contact with someone known to have COVID-19 should contact Public Health for an assessment.

If they are symptomatic, they will be placed in Quarantine for 10-14 days. During their quarantine period, they will be sent a daily symptom monitoring sheet to track their progress.

At the end of their quarantine period, they will be tested on day 13 or 14 and if negative allowed to return to work and other activities.

This test will be arranged by their designated Public Health Officer. Neither the employer nor the employee should arrange for their test.

Please note that some symptomatic employees may need to self-isolate for longer based on the advice of public health or their health care provider.

Vaccinated and asymptomatic

Vaccinated persons who had close contact but are not symptomatic at present or asymptomatic will not be required to quarantine or self-isolate.

They can return to work and perform their regular duties, ensuring that they adhere to all the public health measures. They must also monitor themselves for 14 days. If at any point they develop symptoms they should immediately inform their employer, self-isolate and contact public health.

Self-isolation/Quarantine will start from the date that symptoms started. At the end of their quarantine period, they will be tested on day 13 or 14 and if negative allowed to return to work and other activities.

This test will be arranged by their designated Public Health Officer. Neither the employer nor the employee should arrange for their test.

V. Procedure for Return to Work

All positive cases should present a 'Return to Work' form from the Ministry of Health, Public Health Unit.

The receipt of this form is clearance that your employee is non-infectious, recovered and clinically well to return to work. Employees do not have to present their negative laboratory report and should not be forced to present it.

VI. Addressing Stigma in the workplace

The COVID-19 pandemic has sparked a rise in stigma and prejudice against people who have the virus. Persons (especially close contacts) may be feeling angry, anxious or scared and may be looking for someone to blame.

There should be a zero tolerance policy to stigma and discrimination in the workplace upon the return of a Covid-19 positive case.

Some practices or measures your workplace can employ are:

1. Providing virtual counselling services and support groups for employees to help them cope with stress and posttraumatic stress disorder in the context of COVID-19

2. Provide support services for people diagnosed with or recovered from COVID-19 to mitigate internalized, experienced or anticipated stigma; where possible, sessions should be led or co-facilitated by people who have recovered from COVID-19.

3. Be careful of the language used to describe the virus or someone who has the virus.
    - *Avoid using "Asian/Chinese/Wuhan flu."*

4. Stay informed with facts from credible sources. There are many posts on social media about the virus, how it originated and how it is spread. Most of these are speculation and not fact. Do not encourage the discussion or spread of misinformation.

5. Raise awareness about COVID-19 by sharing messages based on facts. Correct any misconceptions that people believe or have spread.

6. Respect people's privacy. There is no need to tell others if someone you know is infected. Instead remind others to always use preventative measures
.
7. Focus on positives, such as the steps being taken to contain the virus and the preventative steps that people can take to keep safe.

8. Support someone who is experiencing stigma or discrimination because of COVID-19. Speak out against stigmatizing behaviours.

Notes