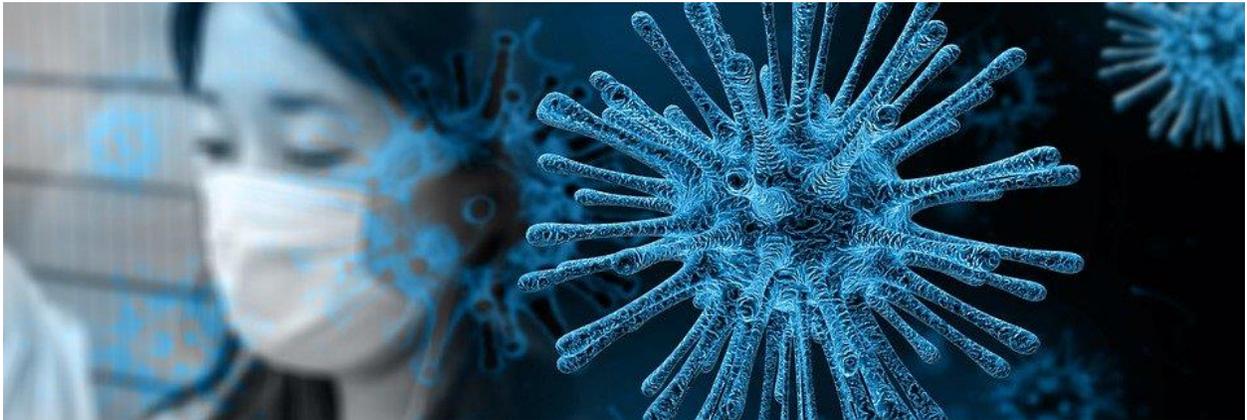


Coronavirus: Communicating Responsibly in the Workplace



**A Guide for Risk Managers, Safety Professionals, and
Human Resources Professionals**

By: Abby Ferri

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Coronaviruses are a large family of viruses you are likely already familiar with including the common cold and more severe diseases like Middle East Respiratory Syndrome (MERS-CoV) and Severe Acute Respiratory Syndrome (SARS-CoV).

On January 30, 2020, the COVID-19 outbreak was declared as a public health emergency of international concern by the International Health Regulations Emergency Committee of the World Health Organization (WHO). A public health emergency was declared in the United States on January 31, 2020. This white paper was developed on February 27, 2020 to assist workplace risk managers, safety directors, human resources managers, and those in similar roles with communication in their organization and with development of policy to address this outbreak and in anticipation of future outbreaks and pandemic events.

Novel coronavirus is a new strain that was not previously found in humans. You will see this novel coronavirus referred to as “coronavirus disease,” SARS-CoV-2, COVID-19, and 2019-nCoV. These terms can be used interchangeably. The outbreak is impacting people mostly in China, with some outbreaks in other countries. Most people who become infected with coronavirus experience mild illness and recover, however it can be more severe for others.

People of all ages can be infected by coronavirus. Those with pre-existing medical conditions like asthma, diabetes, and heart disease, and older people are more susceptible to becoming severely ill with the virus, impacting their chances of recovery.

Signs of coronavirus infection include respiratory symptoms like cough and shortness of breath accompanied by a fever. In severe cases, COVID-19 can cause pneumonia, SARS, kidney failure, or death.

The usual precautions apply for preventing spread of coronavirus infection, including hand washing, covering your mouth and nose when coughing or sneezing, and avoiding close contact with people showing symptoms of respiratory illness. This paper will provide more specific information and resources suitable for distributing to employees from a workplace risk management perspective.

Ensure a foundation of good hygiene

No matter what is going on in the world with infectious disease or our usual flu season, it is always best practice to wash your hands frequently with soap and water. This kills viruses that may be on your hands. When soap and water is not accessible, use of an alcohol-based hand sanitizer product is recommended. Whatever you use, wash your hands for at least 20 seconds.

If you notice someone sneezing or coughing, keep at least a 3 feet distance from them, this is called “social distancing” and can help put space between you and airborne droplets that could contain viruses. If you are coughing or sneezing, cover your mouth and nose with a tissue or your bent elbow. Dispose of any used tissues immediately, and then wash your hands.

Even with proper and frequent hand washing, it is important to avoid touching your eyes, nose, and mouth. If you touch a surface containing a virus with your hands, that virus can quickly enter the body and cause illness.

Make it a point to clean surfaces in common areas of your workplace and home. Chemical disinfectants can kill the coronavirus on surfaces, look for bleach/chlorine-based disinfectants, solvents of bleach or chlorine, 75% ethanol, peracetic acid, and chloroform. These chemicals should not be put on the skin or under your nose however, and they would have little impact on the virus if you did and could cause harm to your skin.

What about masks?

You and your employees may see images on the news of people throughout the world wearing masks. The WHO advises that otherwise healthy people do not need to wear a mask unless they are taking care of someone that is suspected to be infected with 2019-nCoV. The WHO does advise wearing a mask if one is actively sneezing or coughing.

If a person chooses to wear a mask, they should understand its proper use, limitations, how to wear it correctly, and how to dispose of it properly. When masks are used or disposed of incorrectly, they become a source of infection as the germs remain on the mask.

The WHO recommends a pleated and flat medical mask, with metal nose bridge and elastic straps on either side or on the top of the head. The mask should cover the nose and mouth. The wearer should avoid touching the mask while it is in use. When removing the mask, do not touch the front, only touch the straps to remove them from behind your ears or the head. Wash hands after disposing of the mask. Masks should not be reused, and if they become humid or wet, they should be disposed of.

The WHO has prepared several educational videos, information, and images suitable for sharing on company intranet, email, social media, or printing and hanging as informational signs on safety bulletin boards and at sinks and other areas where employees are likely to see them. Click [here](#) to access the WHO resources on masks.

As organizations and private citizens source masks for use during the 2019-nCoV outbreak, they have been purchasing NIOSH N95 particulate respirators, commonly referred to as “dust masks.” In fact, the [CDC landing page](#) with information about NIOSH-approved particulate filtering facepiece respirators has a notice with a link to the [CDC landing page for COVID-19](#). This rush to buy masks has caused difficulty in finding particulate respirators for work requiring the use of N95 respirators for many organizations. Your purchasing departments may need to extend beyond the usual suppliers of safety equipment to find the required respirators. In extreme cases, there may be shortages of respirators and your personnel will need to institute engineering and work practice controls to reduce respiratory hazards until the respirators they need are back in stock.

Communication is key

Employers and their representatives must communicate with their employees and partners to share information from reputable sources and company policy. The WHO, Centers for Disease Control, and OSHA have established communication sites that are updated in real time.

Encourage employees to stay home if they are sick. Especially if they have a fever, cough, and any difficulty breathing. If a person is experiencing these symptoms, they should seek medical attention, and call their provider's office in advance. Depending on their location, authorities may direct them to a specific health facility based on any outbreak or response protocols.

Take this opportunity to refresh information with personnel about your organization's sick time and leave policies, as they may need to either take care of themselves or others, like children or other family members or acquaintances. Sufficient policies about sick time and leave can help reduce the spread of illness caused by coronaviruses.

If applicable, reinforce work from home policies if work is able to be conducted in that manner. There are plenty of free and on-demand collaboration and communication tools like Zoom and Google Hangouts available. Or remind employees about your organization's preferred web conferencing tools.

For employees traveling for business or leisure, ensure they are informed on the latest travel advisories, especially for any planned overseas travel. Several global organizations have already limited travel. As news breaks of new cases in the United States and throughout the world, encourage employees to discuss their travel plans, purchase trip insurance, and to avoid travel if they have a fever and cough. If a person were to become sick during air travel, they should inform the crew and seek medical care upon arrival.

Dispel myths with facts

The WHO has dedicated a [section of their website](#) to busting myths on COVID-19. To date, there are myths about hand dryers, ultraviolet disinfection lamps, saline rinses, eating garlic, applying sesame oil, taking antibiotics, and the use of alcohol or chlorine spray killing the new coronavirus – all of which are false.

Packages arriving from China are safe to receive and handle as coronaviruses do not survive long on objects like letters or packages.

There is no current evidence that pets and companion animals could spread or be infected with COVID-19, however it is always good practice to wash your hands with soap and water after interacting with pets – this is more to protect you against bacteria like E. coli and Salmonella that are known to pass between pets and humans.

There is no vaccine yet for the new coronavirus, and the current pneumonia and influenza B vaccines will not provide protection against 2019-nCoV. It is still a good idea to receive vaccinations against respiratory illnesses, however.

Expand your knowledge

Information is changing fast, as are the resources for further study. As discussed previously, it is important to vet the sources to ensure timely and accurate information. Even if your organization is not global, the WHO can be an excellent resource. The WHO maintains an educational portal called “Open WHO” that has several classes on pandemics and outbreaks, including a course titled [“Emerging respiratory viruses, including COVID-19: methods for detection, prevention, response and control”](#) that is free for anyone to enroll.

The WHO also has an [extensive library of coronavirus information](#) presented in general and technical ways, and some geared towards specific workers like those in healthcare. The CDC has compiled a risk assessment that is updated frequently for individuals to assess their risk, and for organizations to use as reference as they develop policy language related to the COVID-19 outbreak and craft language in anticipation of future outbreaks.

The CDC has a [suite of resources](#) available for nonpharmaceutical interventions to prevent spread of the common cold, flu, and coronaviruses. These resources are segmented into information for home, workplace, schools, and gatherings. This is also where you will find pre-pandemic planning guides, checklists, and other guidance.

The Johns Hopkins Whiting School of Engineering Center for Systems Science and Engineering created an [interactive map of 2019-nCoV](#) that tracks total global confirmed cases, deaths, recovered cases, and their locations amongst other data points. It is a fantastic visual tool for communicating the magnitude of the virus, nearly in real time.

Don't stress out!

It's normal to feel confused, lost, scared, or other emotions during an outbreak. Refer to the links provided in this white paper to ensure you are informed. Just being on top of the news can alleviate stress in some people while causing more stress for others. If you're in a position to provide information to several employees in the organization, take that role seriously and be proactive with communication.

If you find yourself working from home, do your best to maintain a healthy lifestyle by eating well, getting enough sleep, and reaching out to friends, family, and coworkers to stay social. If you have children or others in the home who are feeling stressed with the news of the day, be supportive and listen to their concerns. Share factual information and be mindful to strike a balance somewhere between overwhelm and being informed.