

COVID-19 (coronavirus)

Questions and answers for Health and Social Care Staff

Staff from across Health and Social Care have pulled together to help tackle the COVID-19 (coronavirus) outbreak preparations and continue to work tirelessly to ensure that our patients, clients, staff and public are as safe as possible. It is only through the ongoing teamwork of our HSC staff across our services that we will be able to tackle the spread of COVID-19 (coronavirus).

The following questions and answers are set out below to advise and guide staff regarding important employment related issues. The situation relating to COVID-19 (coronavirus) is continually evolving and therefore these questions and answers will be subject to ongoing review and amendment as appropriate.

General information:

1. What is COVID-19 (coronavirus)?

Coronaviruses are a large family of viruses that are common across the world. These viruses can cause mild symptoms ranging from a fever and cough to more serious conditions such as severe pneumonia, shortness of breath and breathing difficulties.

In December 2019, a new strain of coronavirus (COVID-19) was first identified in Wuhan City, Hubei, China. This virus has now spread to other countries. The UK Chief Medical Officers have declared the risk to the public to be moderate. But the risk to individuals remains low.

2. What do I need to be aware of in relation to patient/client confidentiality and COVID-19?

The usual strict staff obligations in respect of patient/client confidentiality apply in the context of possible or confirmed diagnosis of COVID-19 (coronavirus). This duty extends to protecting the confidentiality of staff who are being treated as possible or confirmed COVID-19 (coronavirus) patients.

However, under The Public Health Act (Northern Ireland) Doctors in Northern Ireland have a statutory duty to notify the Director of Public Health if they are aware that or have reasonable grounds to suspect that a patient is suffering from one of the notifiable diseases. COVID-19 is now designated as a notifiable disease.

Health, support and self-isolation:

3. My symptoms match those of COVID-19 (coronavirus). What should I do?

As of 13 March 2020 people with a new, persistent cough and/or high temperature MUST self-isolate at home for seven days. Staff should contact their line manager by **telephone** and must follow the stay at home guidance at www.gov.uk/government/publications/covid-19-stay-at-home-guidance/stay-at-home-guidance-for-people-with-confirmed-or-possible-coronavirus-covid-19-infection

Staff are no longer required to contact Occupational Health prior to going on sick leave. Leave will be recorded as sick leave on HRPTS by your manager.

4. Will sick leave associated with COVID-19 affect my sickness record?

No, in order to mitigate any risks of COVID-19 (coronavirus) spreading across the organisation it is important that staff with symptoms do not come into the workplace. Sickness absence related to COVID-19 (coronavirus) will not form part of any absence triggers, and will not be viewed as such in relation to a member of staff's sickness absence record. COVID-19 (coronavirus) sickness will be recorded in the normal way by managers, using a specific code on HRPTS, but this is strictly to allow us to monitor and report on the impact of absence(s) across the organisation.

5. When should I return to work after self-isolating?

You can return to work on day 8 provided you are symptom free. If you are not better after 7 days or your symptoms worsen during home isolation, then you should contact NHS 111 and your GP. You should keep in regular contact with your line manager. Managers can contact Occupational Health for advice if required.

6. I am pregnant, can I work with patients infected with COVID-19?

From the limited number of cases there is no indication currently of a higher risk to pregnant women, unless they have underlying significant health problems, (see RCOG guidance).

www.rcog.org.uk/globalassets/documents/guidelines/coronavirus-covid-19-virusinfection-in-pregnancy-2020-03-09.pdf

Pregnant staff can continue to work whilst adhering to strict Infection Control measures. However consideration should be given to exclusion from aerosol generating procedures, where practicable.

7. A family member has symptoms of COVID-19 (coronavirus). I don't have any symptoms, can I come into work?

Yes, if you do not have any symptoms of COVID-19 (as per question 3) you should come into work as normal.

8. Will there be a vaccine for the pandemic and will it be available to staff?

There is currently no vaccine to prevent COVID-19 (coronavirus) but work is ongoing to develop this.

9. Will the seasonal flu vaccine also be available?

The flu vaccine is available up until the end of March 2020.

10. I have an underlying health condition, can I work with patients infected with COVID-19?

Some healthcare staff who have specific health conditions may be concerned about their risks in the workplace. The staff member should highlight their concerns to their manager. The manager will carry out an initial assessment in relation to their duties, declared health condition and access to and training in appropriate PPE.

Information to date suggests that older people (> age 60) with pre-existing medical conditions particularly chronic respiratory and cardiovascular disease, diabetes or cancers may be at greater risk of severe infection from COVID-19. This list is not exhaustive and may include conditions associated with immunosuppression.

If symptoms are mild and well controlled workplace adjustments would not be required providing that the staff member adheres to strict Infection Control measures. In some individual cases Occupational Health (OH) advice may be required. It is unlikely that OH will advise that an employee is unfit for work but they may advise that a staff member is at additional risk should they contract COVID-19 and may recommend adjustments where practicable, e.g. refraining from participation in aerosol generating procedures.

Caring responsibilities and leave:

11. I have heard that schools and nurseries may close. I will have real childminding difficulties if this happens. What provision will Health and Social Care make for staff in these circumstances?

The closure of schools is a measure that may be taken by schools in an attempt to limit the spread of COVID-19 (coronavirus). While schools will be responsible for making this decision, parents should at least start to consider alternative options for childcare if this were to happen.

Your organisation's normal provision for Time Off for Dependents will apply in these circumstances.

- You should contact your line manager to explain your difficulties and to request paid time off to arrange alternative childcare arrangements. Based on your circumstances, line managers will have the discretion to agree reasonable time off for you to make alternative arrangements.
- Your line manager will try to ascertain and agree with you what alternative working arrangements could apply, for example working at evenings, working from home etc. You should be prepared to be as flexible as possible given the exceptional nature of the circumstances and the need to ensure that essential services can be maintained.
- If, despite having made efforts, you are unable to arrange alternative childcare or work alternative working patterns or times, then consideration of any further time absence from work beyond a maximum of three days should be taken as time owing or annual leave.

Similar arrangements would apply in the event of any break down in caring arrangements for any other dependent.

12. I have annual leave booked – will my annual leave be cancelled?

It is important to remember that staffing levels could be depleted significantly, either due to staff being absent to care for dependents or having symptoms themselves. One way of increasing the available pool of staff will be for managers to review those staff who have been granted annual leave and ask them to change arrangements if possible.

While taking into consideration your own individual wellbeing and the need for you to have a break from work, your manager may ask you to postpone your leave. Remember that where holidays have been booked which involve travel to other countries, restrictions may be placed on travel outside of Northern Ireland by Government.

Normal annual leave carry-over arrangements can be relaxed following discussion with your line manager due to the exceptional circumstances.

Employee concerns and redeployment:

13. Can I refuse to provide services to a patient or client who has COVID-19 (coronavirus)?

The HSC takes very seriously the health of its staff. You should discuss your concerns with your line manager and Occupational Health in the first instance particularly if there are circumstances which might put you at higher risk. However you are generally expected to undertake your normal duties, taking all precautions as specified in relation to infection control measures.

14. How do I ensure I am protected if a patient or client is suspected of or confirmed as having contracted COVID-19 (coronavirus)?

You will be fully briefed and trained on the use of Personal Protective Equipment (PPE) and managers have a responsibility to ensure appropriate PPE is in place for you. Wearing of PPE is mandatory, however we appreciate it can be tiring for staff and therefore you and your manager should ensure that you receive adequate rest breaks to avoid fatigue. You must practise and role model hand hygiene measures, and ensure you follow PHA guidance relating to 'Catch it, Bin it, Kill it'.

15. Am I likely to be redeployed?

Services during an emergency may be reduced to the provision of essential care, and therefore some services are very likely to be suspended. Depending on your existing skills and competencies, you may be redeployed to ensure the provision of essential services.

Provided that it does not compromise infection control, you may be requested to relocate as necessary, taking your personal and health circumstances into account and ensuring terms and conditions are adhered to including excess mileage.

16. If I am to be redeployed I am worried about how I will know what to do in a different role. Will I receive training?

Consideration will be given to what is reasonable redeployment and yes, necessary induction and where appropriate relevant training will take place to enable you to take on different duties, however please be assured that you will only be asked to take on tasks within your competence. Where you are working outside your normal role, you should be very mindful of the need to work within your scope of competence and not undertake work which you are not trained or competent to do.

17. If I, as a result of agreed temporary redeployment, am undertaking work of a lower band in another area, will my terms and conditions be protected and will I receive mileage expenses?

Yes, your terms and conditions will be protected if you work in another area during your contracted hours and you will receive mileage payments as appropriate.

18. I am afraid I might get infected with COVID-19 (coronavirus) and pass it on to my family. Do I have to come into work?

The HSC is mindful of the increased anxiety levels of staff during an outbreak and of staff being fearful of putting themselves or their family at risk. However you are required to be at work if you are symptom free. You should of course discuss any health concerns with Occupational Health.

Travel:

19. What is the advice on travel to or from affected areas?

The HSC does not issue travel advice, if you're concerned about the impact of the COVID-19 outbreak on your existing travel plans, check with your airline, tour operator, cruise line or other transport and accommodation providers as applicable. People who plan to travel must check the Foreign and Commonwealth Office (FCO) travel advice at www.gov.uk/guidance/travel-advice-novel-coronavirus

20. I'm planning to travel in the next few weeks, is that okay?

Staff planning to travel must carefully consider travel plans. Because the situation is changeable, we cannot guarantee what countries may have restrictions, or what procedures will be in place on returning to Northern Ireland.

You must follow FCO travel advice at www.gov.uk/guidance/travel-advice-novel-coronavirus

21. I've recently returned from travelling outside of Northern Ireland, what should I do?

You should carry on as normal unless you develop symptoms of COVID-19.

Courses, training and conferences:

22. What are the arrangements for training, course, conferences during this period of time?

There is an enormous amount of work going on within the HSC to help us plan and prepare for the surge of COVID-19 to ensure we can continue to provide essential services and care for patients and clients. With this in mind, to release staff to focus on this important planning and undertake relevant skills training, a number of decisions have been taken:

- for the foreseeable future we will focus on the mandatory/essential training required to enable the upskilling / training of staff, new starts and returnees required to support essential service delivery during the COVID-19 period;
- all other non-essential events and training will be stood down;
- there will be no attendance at regional, national or international courses and conferences; and
- there should be no further work related travel booked outside of Northern Ireland, unless authorised by the relevant Director.

This will release staff to focus on the provision of safe, effective and high quality care during this challenging period.

