

Coronavirus: Protective Measures for the Workplace

The Bottom Line

- *There is no need for panic, as the likelihood of contracting Coronavirus in the United States is low, according to both the CDC and OSHA. Adopting the common sense measures recommended by the CDC will go a long way toward keeping employees healthy during this cold and flu season, including protecting them from Coronavirus. Employers should encourage employees to contact Human Resources with any questions or concerns, including regarding any planned travel.*

In the wake of the Coronavirus outbreak, employers are seeking advice on how to best protect the health and safety of their employees.

Coronavirus is a respiratory virus that spread rapidly after first being identified in Wuhan, China. While the World Health Organization has declared this a global public health emergency, the United States Center for Disease Control (CDC) website currently states that there is low risk of contracting the virus here in the United States. The U.S. Department of Labor Occupational Safety and Health Administration (OSHA) also states on its website that “most American workers are not at significant risk of infection.”

There are, however, confirmed cases in the United States, including in Washington State, Los Angeles, San Francisco, Boston and Chicago. The CDC is expecting to confirm additional U.S. cases.

Because person-to-person transmission of the virus is possible, the CDC has issued a “Level 3” Health Notice, recommending that all non-essential travel to China be avoided for the time being. Similarly, the Department of State has currently issued a “Level 4” Travel Advisory asking people not to travel to China right now due to the Coronavirus outbreak.

Coronavirus has an incubation period of at least two weeks and may be spread by a carrier before the individual exhibits any symptoms of the virus. Symptoms typically include: fever, cough and trouble breathing, which are sometimes accompanied by a sore throat.

Preventative Measures

Employees can be advised to abide by the following CDC-recommended precautions to reduce the risk of catching Coronavirus:

- Wash hands often with soap and water for at least 20 seconds, especially after going to the bathroom, before eating and after blowing your nose, coughing or sneezing.
- If soap and water are not readily available, use an alcohol-based hand sanitizer with at least 60% alcohol. Always wash hands with soap and water if hands are visibly dirty.
- Avoid touching your eyes, nose and mouth with unwashed hands.
- Avoid close contact with people who are sick.

- Stay home when sick.
- Cover coughs or sneezes with a tissue and then throw the tissue in the trash.
- Clean and disinfect frequently touched objects and surfaces in the workplace using a regular household cleaning spray or wipe.

Additional preventative measures for employees include:

- Limiting handshakes.
- Wearing gloves on mass transit and frequently washing the gloves.
- Bringing a mask for use in transit or when traveling.
- Maintaining good indoor ventilation in the workplace.

Employer Next Steps

If employees express concern about scheduled upcoming travel, consider whether alternatives are available, such as video conference, changing the location of the work event or postponing the work event. With regard to employees who may be immuno-compromised or pregnant, employers need to engage in the interactive process and have a [cooperative dialogue](#) with these employees regarding what reasonable accommodations and alternatives may be available in lieu of travel. These communications need to be properly documented in accordance with applicable disability discrimination laws.

For employees who have recently returned from travel in China or from traveling *with* others who may have recently been in China, consider requiring the employees to work remotely for 14 days following their return, as this is the incubation period for Coronavirus. Employees can be instructed to seek medical attention if they exhibit Coronavirus symptoms during the incubation period, and to provide a doctor's note before returning to the office.

For employers who may have employees currently in China, the Department of State strongly recommends that the employees be advised to:

- Stay home as much as possible,
- Limit contact with others,
- Avoid large gatherings, and
- Stock up on food and other supplies to limit movement outside of the home.

Finally, employers should remind employees not to panic, and to avoid any xenophobic or prejudicial remarks toward their Chinese colleagues regarding the Coronavirus, which could lead to allegations of national origin discrimination and harassment.

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