

## Coronavirus/Covid 19 – key fundamentals

Occupational risks of becoming infected with the SARS-CoV-2 coronavirus – and all its variants – exist from leaving home to returning home.

SARS-CoV-2 is the virus that causes coronavirus disease 1919 or Covid-19.

Risks primarily occur in two settings – offices or wherever work is taking place.

The risks in offices are easier to manage – and reduce – than those encountered elsewhere.

Anyone working “away from base”, wherever that is, should ensure risks are appropriately assessed and employers have reasonable precautions in place.

Freelancers should assess the risks for themselves, using the questions here and adopting as many precautions as are reasonable, to limit any risks that they may become infected and that, if (unknowingly) infected, they could pass Covid 19 to others.

Enough became known about the virus that causes Covid-9 fairly quickly for the hazards to be “reasonably foreseeable”. Therefore each should each be risk assessed so legally required reasonable precautions can be put in place.

The coronavirus and its variants are primarily passed from one person to another by airborne particles over distances of less than two (2) metres and by transfer from hard surfaces to the hands and then to the mouth, nose and eyes. Behaving carefully can greatly reduce transmission risks.

In the Republic of Ireland, the Health and Safety Authority has published an overview of regulations covering biological agents.

- [https://www.hsa.ie/eng/Topics/Biological\\_Agents/](https://www.hsa.ie/eng/Topics/Biological_Agents/)

### Risk assessments

The UK Government says airborne transmission is greatly reduced by keeping a distance of about two (2) metres between people, thus eliminating the need for masks. This may be probably impractical in most places of work but good airflow through buildings should also reduce infection risks.

However, the coronavirus can attach itself to the skin (of the hands) and enter the body through the (mucous membranes of) the eyes, nose and mouth.

Factors affecting the survival and “viability” of any virus include the nature of surfaces, exposure to (sun or ultra-violet) light, humidity, temperature and chemicals that can destroy the virus (by killing the

fats, proteins and sugars that form its coating).

Coronavirus 19 infection from soft surfaces, such as fabrics, appears rare.

Risk assessments (RAs) must specifically consider disabilities as well as those who may be additionally vulnerable because their immune systems are in some way compromised. They include pregnant women, those on immuno-suppressant medications or who have medical conditions that can affect immunity.

### Therefore, RAs should consider:

§ Airborne infection – from visitors or others encountered during work;

§ Hard surfaces – and transfer to the hands – wherever work is taking place or who is involved.

### They should also identify:

§ Who is at risk?

§ Where are they at risk? (Who nearby may already be infected and contagious? How is someone at risk? What are they doing to put themselves at risk?)

RAs should always be “suitable and sufficient”, carried out by management and available on request to reps and workers (within a reasonable time).

Beware of generic – downloadable – risk assessments; they rarely identify and consider all the variables of each particular work activity. Expensive software can often be a liability rather than genuinely helpful.

RAs should also be individual, taking account of every person’s risks and hazards as they vary between each of us. Factors such as clinical vulnerability to infections and *protected characteristics* defined by the (UK) Equality Act 2010 must also be considered.

The UK Health and Safety Executive (HSE) has produced a comprehensive guide to carrying out coronavirus risk assessments that also includes many precautions (called “controls”).

- [www.hse.gov.uk/coronavirus/working-safely/risk-assessment.htm](http://www.hse.gov.uk/coronavirus/working-safely/risk-assessment.htm)

### Reasonable precautions

These may include:

- deciding who is deployed where and why, which should ideally include home working arrangements;
- ensuring work stations are far enough apart;
- ensuring washing facilities are easily available or workers have access such facilities wherever they work;
- Alcohol “wipes” are provided or available wherever work is carried out (and wherever people may touch or shake hands);

- providing cleaning gel (of at least 60 per cent alcohol) wherever people may touch one another;
- ensuring all indoor areas are adequately ventilated (to lessen infection risks by dispersing any airborne particles or droplets);
- trying to reduce or eliminate the need for work travel;
- ensuring (work) surfaces are cleaned regularly;
- “hot desking” should be eliminated.

**Individuals** should protect themselves – and others around them – by making sure they:

- Do not sneeze or cough over others (by keeping at least two metres between themselves and others and using handkerchiefs or tissues that are then disposed off and destroyed safely).
- Keep hands as clean as possible, washing them with soap and water for at least 20 seconds or cleaning gels or wipes (with at least 60 per cent alcohol), getting between the fingers and then trying not to touch their faces. Frequent face washing helps too.
- Clean and disinfect frequently touched objects and surfaces, especially phones and computers.

**Freelances** should consider the probability of encountering someone with the virus at public events and being where infection may occur against the practicalities of taking reasonable precautions to protect themselves.

Those working regular or booked shifts should approach those who hired them and establish, in writing, that they will still be paid if they are denied access to an employers’ premises or computer systems preventing from doing such work once it has been confirmed (again in writing).

Those using cameras and audio recorders may wish to clean their kit with alcohol wipes after use and, in terms of audio recording, using equipment that functions adequately with a distance of at least two metres between any two people (when carrying out interviews) or cover windshields with disposable bags.

## What reps can do

Reps in organisations where the union is recognised should ask managers for copies of the risk assessments and seek to ensure they are suitable and sufficient, in line with the Health and Safety at Work Act 1974.

They should also remind managers that it is never in an organisation’s interests for people with airborne infections to be anywhere they could potentially infect others (and increase sickness absence) – and that adequate arrangements should be made for all appropriate workers (including freelances) to have

access to computer systems so they can work from home.

Introducing permanent home working may represent a change in working conditions that should be negotiated and agreed within the law and relevant agreements between the NUJ and employers.

Managers should also be reminded of the need to be able to arrange appropriate cover for any worker, be they staff or freelance, at very short notice in the event of any infection scare or uncertainty. Adequate “work at home” arrangements should be negotiated.

Reps can also carry out inspections to ensure that reasonable precautions are in place. Managers should be notified when inspections are planned so they can be present when they take place. Health and safety reps can carry out inspections in work time.

Any encounters or “near misses” should be recorded in incident books and reviewed regularly. Risk assessments and reasonable precautions should be updated to reflect the findings of such reviews.

Safety committees should also ensure that Covid 19 risk assessments and reasonable precautions are reviewed as more information about the nature of the virus becomes available.

## Feeling ill?

If you feel you may have been exposed to the virus or you are unwell, contact your line manager and appropriate health services – such as dialling NHS 111 in the UK – for testing and advice.

Guidance for employers about sending staff home is available on relevant government websites.

## Further reading

Being familiar with government guidance is important both in terms of what is available for individuals and from the Health and Safety Executive.

The main government website includes links to information specific to the devolved nations of Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland.

For the UK: <https://www.gov.uk/coronavirus> and <https://www.hse.gov.uk/> (click on the link to “Coronavirus”).

For the Republic of Ireland: [https://www.hsa.ie/eng/Topics/Biological\\_Agents/](https://www.hsa.ie/eng/Topics/Biological_Agents/)

Links checked April 2021. The information is the best available at this time. Issued by the NUJ Health and Safety Committee. Please note this information is for guidance only and does not constitute legal advice. Should you require legal assistance, please contact your union official or NUJ rep.