

THE EMPLOYER'S GUIDE TO THE CORONAVIRUS

How to Protect Your Colorado Workplace

Employers are facing questions about the potential impact of COVID-19 in the workplace. While experts race to understand its public health impacts, we want to help local employers and managers do their best to make sense of, and lead employees through this uncertain situation.

We can't promise COVID-19 won't reach Colorado, but we can share FAQs about the new virus and precautions you can take to protect your workplace, whether your team is fighting the common flu, or COVID-19. Our recommendations have been corroborated with information from the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention and Colorado Department of Public Health & Environment. This article is not intended to be exhaustive and we encourage you to contact your healthcare professional for immediate medical advice.

What is the coronavirus?

Coronavirus (COVID-19) is a respiratory illness that can spread from person to person, according to the Center for Disease Control (CDC). The virus that causes COVID-19 is a novel coronavirus that was first identified during an investigation into an outbreak in Wuhan, China. There is an ongoing investigation to determine more about this outbreak. Visit the [CDC's coronavirus page](#) to learn more.

What are the symptoms for COVID-19?

Patients with COVID-19 have reported mild to severe respiratory illness, including the following symptoms:



Coughing



Shortness of Breath



Fever

Some patients may not report fever, especially the very young, elderly, immunosuppressed, and people taking certain fever-lowering medications. Employers would be wise to be particularly sensitive to requests from employees whose health is vulnerable, including employees with immunodeficiencies and those who are older or pregnant.

Have there been any confirmed cases?

There have been no confirmed cases of COVID-19 (as of March 3), and the risk to the state is deemed low, according to the Colorado Department of Public Health & Environment. Nevertheless, federal, state, and local officials in Colorado recognize the seriousness of the situation and are working diligently with officials to prevent the spread of COVID-19 within our state.

What can I do to maintain a safe work environment?

The best way to prevent sickness is to avoid being exposed. Here are some practical steps you can take:



Encourage sick employees to work remotely

Employees should stay at home if they have symptoms of acute respiratory illnesses (i.e. cough, shortness of breath). They should be fever free (100.4°F or below) for 24 hours without the use of fever-reducing or symptom-altering medicines before returning to work.

Do not wait for employees to provide a healthcare provider's note to validate illness or to return to work if they are sick with acute respiratory illness (if possible and permitted). Many medical offices and facilities may be extremely busy and may not be able to accommodate within a timely manner.

Separate sick employees

Employees should be separated from other employees and be sent home immediately if they arrive to work with acute respiratory illness symptoms (i.e. cough, shortness of breath) or develop such symptoms during the day.



Encourage respiratory etiquette and hand hygiene by all employees

- Avoid close contact with people that have symptoms
- Avoid touching your eyes, nose, and mouth
- Provide tissues and no-touch disposal receptacles
- Encourage sick employees to wear masks
- Encourage staff to use alcohol-based hand sanitizers (60-95% alcohol based)
- Remind staff to wash their hands with soap and water for 20 seconds (two rounds of the "Happy Birthday" song)
- Routinely clean and sanitize hands after visiting high-traffic areas like conference rooms or break rooms



Perform routine environmental cleaning

Routinely clean all frequently touched surfaces in the workplace (e.g. doorknobs, keyboards, remote controls, desks, etc...) These surfaces can be wiped down before/after use so ensure your team has a supply of disposable wipes.

Note: No additional disinfection beyond routine cleaning is recommended by the CDC at this time.

An employee has returned to work after traveling from an area with COVID-19 outbreak. What can I do?

You have several options that you can consider.

Advise employees to take certain steps after traveling:

Advise employees to check themselves for symptoms and encourage them to tell their manager immediately if they start to have symptoms. Promptly call a healthcare provider for assistance if needed.

Require the employee to work from home:

You can require the employee to work from home for the duration of the incubation period (1-14 days) IF you have a reasonable objective belief (not based on unfounded fears/suspicion) that an employee may have been exposed to COVID-19 and is a danger to the workplace.

Factors to you should consider before making this decision should include:

- The duration of the employee's trip
- Specific cities/areas visited (should be rationally tied to places with a known outbreak of COVID-19 and not just "Asia")
- Amount of time the employee has returned from his/her trip
- Employees' symptoms if any

If you require your employee to work from home for the duration of the incubation, be open and flexible and avoid an "all or nothing approach." Remember, this work from home option is temporary on an as-needed basis with no expectation of ongoing continuance following the incubation period. Engage with your employee and set clear expectations as to what parts of the employee's responsibilities can be performed as home, even partially. If your employee's position does not allow him/her to work from home and carry out any essential functions of the job, if that employee is in a non-exempt position you do not have to pay your employee to remain at home for the duration of the incubation period. If, however, your employee is in an exempt position and is able to perform some parts of his or her job for all or part of the workweek at home, you must pay that employee for the entire workweek.

Note: If you implement this policy, you must be careful that the policy is applied fairly and equally to all employees. If not, you risk potentially violating the Civil Rights Act (e.g., requiring only Chinese nationals to work from home) or the American Disabilities Act. For

For business travel

Employers should consider limiting business travel to affected areas at this time and provide reasonable accommodations such as video conferencing during the duration of the threat and heightened risk.

You should also monitor travel alerts from the U.S. State Department to seek objective guidance about the health risks posed by travel to specific areas.

For personal travel

You can't force an employee to cancel their personal travel, but you can encourage them to visit the [CDC's Travels Health Site](#) to get the latest guidance and recommendations for those who intend on traveling.

Upon their return, advise employees to check themselves for symptoms. Promptly call a healthcare provider for assistance if needed.

Do I need an emergency remote-work plan?

If you don't already have a business continuity plan, establishing an emergency remote-work plan is advised to be as prepared as possible. This plan can be used whenever severe disruptions to the workplace occur, whether it's from the coronavirus or an outbreak of the common cold or flu. Here's practical steps you can take to prepare for a possibility that part of your workforce may need to work remotely.

Identify jobs and tasks that will be impacted.

Take a look at existing employee roles and responsibilities. Identify the following: 1) What has to get done on-site and in-person, 2) What can be done, even partially, through remote work. For work that requires physical presence (e.g. restaurant work), start thinking through your contingency plan. This may include engaging a temp agency to quickly find healthy contractors to do the work. Or, this could include implementing on-call staffing policies to manage short staffing. For work that can be handled outside the workplace, consider reevaluating your remote-work policies. Encourage managers to challenge default assumptions about the flexibility of certain roles as they think through their options.

Leverage technology where possible

Are there any tools or technology gaps that you need to close the loop or to empower employees to work remotely? Things like setting up employees with video conference (e.g. Zoom), leveraging document sharing tools like Google Docs, or loaning out laptops or other devices to employees that don't have access to a personal device to do work. Work with your managers or IT department (if you have) to audit your options, create a contingency plan, and how you'll provide any training to increase employees' comfort levels and adoption.

Create a communications protocol (and share it widely):

Last but not least, communicate with your employees. Set-up a protocol on how to reach everyone (G-chat, text, phone call, etc...) to handle staffing and work loads. If you've updated your remote-work plans, share it widely with all your employees and be available to answer questions as they arise. Consider organizing a company huddle to address concerns and align everyone on the plan moving forward.

How can I address fears in my workplace?

Educate employees:

You can address the general fear of COVID-19 by educating employees on the signs and symptoms of the coronavirus. Let them know what to look for and the precautions they can take to minimize the risk of getting sick or spreading the virus. Post updates from the CDC and the Colorado Department of Public Health & Environment in common areas and let employees know you're monitoring any guidance issues by the appropriate federal and state agencies related to the COVID-19 outbreak.

Consider sharing this flying by the HDOH: COVID-19: [What You Need to Know](#)

Handle employee concerns seriously:

If employees report a concern relating to COVID-19, or about a co-worker that recently returned from an "outbreak" area, you should list and document those concerns as if the employee had come to you to complain about a potential safety hazard. Let the employees know that this information will be evaluated and appropriate steps taken if necessary.

What else should I keep in mind?

As long as there are no confirmed cases in Colorado, employers should not overreact to COVID-19. Most can continue to operate as normal, while taking normal precautions regarding sick employees. Those with significant employee travel or employee interchange in Asia should continue to take steps that are appropriate in the light of all circumstances and updates issued by the Colorado Department of Public Health & Environment and CDC. While attention on COVID-19 is high, take this opportunity to remind and reinforce sick leave policies and encourage employees to stay home if they are feeling ill, to the extent feasible.

Disclaimer: The information above is provided based upon currently known information. The progress of this disease is constantly evolving. We will update information and advice to employers as appropriate. For immediate medical questions, please contact your healthcare professional.

At Obsidian HR, we stand ready to help empower your business to succeed. A quick no-cost, no-obligation conversation is the best way to get started with us. We're waiting to hear from you!