

CORONAVIRUS DISEASE (COVID-19) OUTBREAK: RIGHTS, ROLES AND RESPONSIBILITIES OF HEALTH WORKERS, INCLUDING KEY CONSIDERATIONS FOR OCCUPATIONAL SAFETY AND HEALTH

Coronaviruses are a group of viruses belonging to the family of *Coronaviridae*, which infect both animals and humans. Human coronaviruses can cause mild disease similar to a common cold, while others cause more severe disease (such as MERS - Middle East Respiratory Syndrome and SARS – Severe Acute Respiratory Syndrome). A new coronavirus that previously has not been identified in humans emerged in Wuhan, China in December 2019.

Signs and symptoms include respiratory symptoms and include fever, cough and shortness of breath. In more severe cases, infection can cause pneumonia, severe acute respiratory syndrome and sometimes death. Standard recommendations to prevent the spread of COVID-19 include frequent cleaning of hands using alcohol-based hand rub or soap and water; covering the nose and mouth with a flexed elbow or disposable tissue when coughing and sneezing; and avoiding close contact with anyone that has a fever and cough.

WHO is working closely with global experts, governments and partners to rapidly expand scientific knowledge on this new virus and to provide timely advice on measures to protect people's health and prevent the spread of this outbreak.

Rights, roles and responsibilities of health workers, including occupational safety and health

Health workers are at the front line of any outbreak response and as such are exposed to hazards that put them at risk of infection with an outbreak pathogen (in this case COVID-19). Hazards include pathogen exposure, long working hours, psychological distress, fatigue, occupational burnout, stigma, and physical and psychological violence. This document highlights the rights and responsibilities of health workers, including specific measures needed to protect occupational safety and health.

Health worker rights include that employers and managers in health facilities:

- assume overall responsibility to ensure that all necessary preventive and protective measures are taken to minimize occupational safety and health risks¹;
- provide information, instruction and training on occupational safety and health, including;
 - Refresher training on infection prevention and control (IPC); and
 - Use, putting on, taking off and disposal of personal protective equipment (PPE);
- provide adequate IPC and PPE supplies (masks, gloves, goggles, gowns, hand sanitizer, soap and water, cleaning supplies) in sufficient quantity to healthcare or other staff caring for suspected or confirmed

¹ Including implementation of occupational safety and health management systems to identify hazards and assess risks to health and safety; infection prevention and control (IPC) measures; zero-tolerance policies towards workplace violence and harassment.

COVID-19 patients, such that workers do not incur expenses for occupational safety and health requirements;

- familiarize personnel with technical updates on COVID-19 and provide appropriate tools to assess, triage, test and treat patients and to share infection prevention and control information with patients and the public;
- as needed, provide with appropriate security measures for personal safety;
- provide a blame-free environment for workers to report on incidents, such as exposures to blood or bodily fluids from the respiratory system or to cases of violence, and to adopt measures for immediate follow-up, including support to victims;
- advise workers on self-assessment, symptom reporting and staying home when ill;
- maintain appropriate working hours with breaks;
- consult with health workers on occupational safety and health aspects of their work and notify the labour inspectorate of cases of occupational diseases;
- not be required to return to a work situation where there is continuing or serious danger to life or health, until the employer has taken any necessary remedial action;
- allow workers to exercise the right to remove themselves from a work situation that they have reasonable justification to believe presents an imminent and serious danger to their life or health. When a health worker exercises this right, they shall be protected from any undue consequences;
- honour the right to compensation, rehabilitation and curative services if infected with COVID-19 following exposure in the workplace. This would be considered occupational exposure and resulting illness would be considered an occupational disease,
- provide access to mental health and counselling resources; and
- enable co-operation between management and workers and/or their representatives.

Health workers should:

- follow established occupational safety and health procedures, avoid exposing others to health and safety risks and participate in employer-provided occupational safety and health training;
- use provided protocols to assess, triage and treat patients;
- treat patients with respect, compassion and dignity;
- maintain patient confidentiality;
- swiftly follow established public health reporting procedures of suspect and confirmed cases;
- provide or reinforce accurate infection prevention and control and public health information, including to concerned people who have neither symptoms nor risk;
- put on, use, take off and dispose of personal protective equipment properly;
- self-monitor for signs of illness and self-isolate or report illness to managers, if it occurs;
- advise management if they are experiencing signs of undue stress or mental health challenges that require support interventions; and
- report to their immediate supervisor any situation which they have reasonable justification to believe presents an imminent and serious danger to life or health.

Additional resources

As knowledge of the virus develops, WHO will continue to create and update [technical guidance](#).

Useful materials include:

- [Emerging respiratory viruses, including nCoV: methods for detection, prevention, response and control](#)
- [Surveillance and case definitions](#)
- [Early investigations](#)
- [Patient management](#)
- [Infection prevention and control](#)
- [Laboratory guidance](#)
- [Country readiness](#)
- [Risk communication and community engagement](#)
- [Disease commodity package](#)
- [Reduction of transmission from animals to humans](#)