



## Guidance for offices and workspaces

### Business continuity

Success in controlling the COVID-19 pandemic depends on the full cooperation of all sectors of society – including businesses and employers – who play an essential role in curbing the spread of this disease, whilst continuing to provide their services to the community. Public Health Authorities will support business continuity while coordinating action in the COVID-19 pandemic.

Recognising that the COVID-19 pandemic is a public health emergency and that business continuity in respect of COVID-19 should be founded in expert health advice and constructive dialogue, the following principles shall apply:

- ✓ All workers, regardless of their occupation or how they are engaged, have the right to a healthy and safe working environment.
- ✓ The COVID-19 pandemic requires a uniquely focused approach to work health and safety as it applies to businesses, workers and others in the workplace such as clients, suppliers and service providers.
- ✓ To keep workplaces healthy and safe, businesses must, in consultation with workers, assess the way they work to identify, understand and quantify risks and to implement and review control measures to address those risks.
- ✓ As COVID-19 restrictions are gradually relaxed, businesses and workers must work together to adapt and promote safe work practices, consistent with advice from health authorities, to ensure their workplaces are ready for the social distancing, exemplary hygiene measures and specific preventive measures that will be an important part of the transition.
- ✓ Businesses and workers must actively control against the transmission of COVID-19 while at work, consistent with the updated advice from the Public Health Authorities.
- ✓ Businesses and workers must prepare for the possibility that there will be cases of COVID-19 in the workplace and be ready to respond immediately, appropriately, effectively and efficiently, and consistent with specific recommendations from health authorities.
- ✓ Some businesses may be struggling with where to start and how to implement the changes. As businesses slowly settle into the new normality, it is important that our workspaces adhere to social distancing measures so that businesses can begin working safely and trading fully again and thus lessen the impact on their own future viability and on the economy in general.



- ✓ Whilst a substantial number of businesses were able to take advantage of teleworking, for many other office-based businesses this is neither a sustainable nor an achievable way to work in the medium and longer term. Due to particular business constraints, these businesses need to implement changes that ensure returning employees stay safe in the workplace.

## How COVID-19 spreads

The virus which causes COVID-19 disease can be spread through droplets from a sick person or on contact (by touch). COVID-19 disease often presents with coughing or sneezing which release droplets of infected fluid. Cases may present with other symptoms or none at all. Most of these droplets can fall on nearby surfaces and objects - such as desks, tables, machinery, equipment, floors, walls clothes or telephones. People can catch COVID-19 by touching contaminated surfaces or objects – and then touching their eyes, nose or mouth. Being within a distance of less than two metres of a person with COVID-19, one has a higher risk of catching the disease by breathing in droplets coughed out or exhaled by them.

In other words, COVID-19 spreads in a similar way to flu. The most common symptoms of coronavirus include cough, fever, shortness of breath, tiredness, sore throat, runny / blocked nose, headache, muscle pain, loss of smell, loss of taste, diarrhoea or vomiting. Most persons infected with COVID-19 experience mild symptoms and recover. However, some go on to experience more serious illness and may require hospital care. Risk of serious illness rises with age. People with weakened immune systems and people with conditions such as diabetes, heart and lung disease are also more vulnerable to serious illness.

Persons who develop these symptoms, are to stay at home, contact their doctor and contact the Public Health team on (+356) 111 for further advice and guidance. For more information, seek guidance on [www.covid19health.gov.mt](http://www.covid19health.gov.mt)

## Keeping workers safe and limiting the spread of COVID-19

Employers should be doing the following at their workplace:

- ✓ ensure physical distancing by keeping a distance of at least 2 metres between people where possible
- ✓ encourage all workers to frequently wash their hands for at least 20 seconds with soap and water or by using an 70% alcohol-based hand sanitiser and to practise good personal hygiene.



- ✓ be aware of COVID-19 symptoms (fever, cough, sore throat, shortness of breath, headaches, tiredness, muscle pain, loss of taste, loss of smell, vomiting and diarrhoea) and make sure workers do not come to work if they are unwell
- ✓ ensure that the workplace is regularly cleaned and disinfected
- ✓ have signs and posters around the workplace to remind workers and others of the risks of COVID-19 and the measures necessary to stop its spread.

### Specific general hygiene practices

- ✓ Steps need to be taken to ensure that additional hygiene practices become common place in the office.
- ✓ Staff need to pay special attention to hand hygiene and it is recommended that all staff wash or sanitize hands frequently.
- ✓ Hand sanitising units and antibacterial wipe dispensers are low cost, easy installations and will be essential in combatting the spread of infection.
- ✓ Frequent cleaning and disinfection of common surfaces further reduces risk of surface contamination spreading to healthy persons.
- ✓ Sufficient supplies of hand sanitizer and cleaning materials are the responsibility of the employer.
- ✓ Hand hygiene is of paramount importance to avoid infection. It is recommended that staff carry hand-sanitizer to use frequently, especially after touching common surfaces in cars, public transport, organised transport, at the workplace, before and after meals, before and after going to the restroom, and before and after cigarette breaks.
- ✓ Use signs and posters to build awareness of good handwashing technique, the need to increase handwashing – these can be downloaded from [www.covid19health.gov.mt](http://www.covid19health.gov.mt)

### Distancing measures and limitations of group sizes

- ✓ Maintaining distance between individuals reduces the risk for healthy persons to inhale infected droplets.
- ✓ There should be at least four (4) square metres per staff member within the office or office space and a minimum of two (2) metres between staff members. When this is not possible, acrylic or tempered glass screens are to be used or masks or visors must be worn at all times.
- ✓ All staff members must have a personal working space. The practice in an office of allocating desks to workers when they are required or on a rota system, rather than giving each worker their own desk (also referred to as hot-desking) shall be prohibited.
- ✓ Desks should be safely spaced and divided respecting distancing measures.



- ✓ In larger, open plan environments consider one-way systems in walkways, to create circulation within the workspace.
- ✓ Remote working should continue to be encouraged where possible to reduce face-to-face contact.
- ✓ The number of staff in the office at any one time should be kept to the minimum required. Teams grouped by varying skillset will allow for easy isolation should virus symptoms be present.

### Cleaning Procedures

- ✓ Cleaning and disinfection will need to be increased as standard, with regular disinfecting of shared areas.
- ✓ High traffic contact zones, such as handles, bathrooms, desks and chairs, lift buttons, palm readers, shared printers and copiers will need frequent cleaning and disinfection throughout the day.

### Actions to Make Offices and Workspaces Safer

Returning to the office requires that levels of hygiene are increased and permanently maintained in order to protect staff and visitors from viral infection. These increased measures will have a direct impact on the requirements of the workplace environment, some of which will take time to plan and implement. Many of these steps can actually be achieved quickly and simply.

#### Remove absorbent furniture and fabrics

- ✓ Unless they are bleach friendly, soft furnishings such as curtains and carpets are hard to keep clean. Instead, where possible choose office furniture and screening that is functional and easy to wipe down.
- ✓ Install hand sanitising dispensing units.
- ✓ Encourage the regular use of hand-sanitisers.
- ✓ Promote the importance of keeping personal workspaces clean.

#### Allow 2 metres between all seating

- ✓ 2 metres should be granted between all workspaces as a minimum. Add acrylic or tempered glass screens between workspaces if necessary.
- ✓ If this is not possible when at full occupancy, consider shift patterns or part-remote working to reduce the overall number of staff in the office at any one time.
- ✓ Installing screening between workspaces and public areas is a quick and effective way to protect your staff and, if applicable, the general public from the risk of cross contamination.



- ✓ De-clutter personal workspaces. Uncluttered environments are easier to disinfect and maintain cleanliness of and clear of clutter.
- ✓ Discourage desk toys and minimise paperwork.

### **Integrate effective hygiene practices into your culture**

- ✓ Create policies to support your new measures to ensure that staff are fully updated.
- ✓ In the event of sickness, staff should be encouraged to stay at home.
- ✓ In the case of vulnerable staff, remote working should be provided as an option.

## **Designing a Safe Office Layout**

There are many steps that can be taken to adapt your workplace to prevent the spread of infection and minimise impact of a further outbreak in the future.

- ✓ Desks and workspaces should be reconfigured to allow at least 2 metres between employees.
- ✓ Desks should also be reconfigured to create back-to-back or side-to-side working arrangements whenever possible.
- ✓ Partitioning should be installed to allow staff to work closely without the risk of cross contamination.
- ✓ Shared spaces such as kitchens and meeting rooms should be redesigned to allow for appropriate distancing measures to be carried out, including floor markers and signage to help guide and remind staff to maintain safe distances between themselves.

## **Open Plan Office Design**

Open plan offices should be divided using screening so that employees can work while minimizing the risk of infection and working spaces should be configured to allow for back-to-back working. Working hours may need to be adjusted, where viable, to discourage full occupancy within the office.

In larger, open plan spaces, one-way traffic systems should be considered to help support social distancing in walkways. Floor stickers, signage or painted visual aids should be installed to enable safe working distances to be adhered to. Installing additional break-out zones will reduce congregation of people during breaks, as will staggering break-times and lunches.

## **Safe Work Planning**

Where possible the minimum number of staff should be in the workplace at one time. These core members should practice social distancing, from each other



and the general public, supported by way of screening and/or physical distancing measures.

Dividing the workforce into shifts is the best way to ensure business continuity. Where physical distancing is not viable, work teams or groups should be established, made up of varying skillsets. It is recommended that different teams or groups keep contact between them, both at and away from the office, including breaks, to an absolute minimum. In this way, should there be the possibility of an outbreak of infection within one team, it is relatively easy to isolate the case to one section of your business – allowing work to continue and minimising the risk of spreading the infection.

Face-to-face meetings such as handovers between shifts, when unavoidable, should be held in well ventilated rooms or even better, when the weather permits, outside, and should be kept as short as possible, ideally shorter than 15 minutes.

## Other procedures to reduce risk of COVID-19 spread in offices and workspaces

### Occupational safety and worker's rights

- ✓ Businesses shall designate someone responsible for safety at work, whom the staff may contact.
- ✓ The employer is responsible for providing information and guidelines on occupational safety and the health and well-being of all members of staff.
- ✓ At a minimum, the occupational health and safety measures in accordance with these recommendations that relate to general occupational safety must be communicated to all those involved.
- ✓ Staff shall be informed of the rules on sick leave. Individuals displaying fever (37.2°C or more) or flu-like symptoms must remain at home until they have been cleared by a medical professional before they can return to work.
- ✓ Persons suffering from COVID-19 infections or their contacts must be cleared by the public health authorities.

### Travel to and from work

- ✓ If travel to and from work is by means of public transport, private rental vehicle or shared means provided by the employer, a mask or visor must be worn. This is not required if travelling in a personal vehicle.



- ✓ All non-private vehicles used must be compliant with the Transport Malta regulations in place regarding separation of driver and passengers and limitations of occupancy below the maximum capacity.
- ✓ Company vehicles must additionally be equipped with hand hygiene and disinfection products, paper towels and waste bags. For necessary work-related trips, wherever possible, the same vehicles should not be used by multiple employees. The group of employees who share a vehicle – simultaneously or consecutively – must also be kept as small as possible, for example by assigning a vehicle to three (3) persons as a fixed team. The interiors of company vehicles must be regularly cleaned, especially if they are used by multiple employees.

### Specific measures in the office

- ✓ Each morning all staff members must have their body temperature checked before entering the workplace. Individuals displaying fever (37.2°C or more) shall not be allowed to enter.
- ✓ If symptoms arise at the workplace, temperature should be re-checked. Regardless of the presence or absence of fever, no staff member should remain on site with symptoms. If symptoms arise, the individual must return home alone, and remain there until medical assessment is carried out and necessary care instituted.
- ✓ Restrooms must be sanitized frequently. Special attention must be given to common surfaces such as light-switches, doorknobs and locking mechanisms, taps, flushing mechanisms, toilet seats etc.
- ✓ Breakrooms, kitchens and dining areas are to be spacious enough to allow the safety distance of 2 metres between all staff members. Eating meals outdoors is preferred. It may be necessary to make schedules for such facilities to be used by more people than can be accommodated at one time. If multiple groups must use the same facilities in sequence they should be sanitized between groups.
- ✓ Hygiene of workspaces, break rooms and other shared spaces as well as equipment is to be maintained throughout the day.
- ✓ Doors and windows must be kept open, air-conditioning adjusted for more ventilation and recirculated air-conditioning avoided.
- ✓ Airconditioning flaps should be directed towards the ceiling. Filters should be cleaned well and maintained properly
- ✓ Extractors are recommended to improve air circulation. These must be thoroughly cleaned every week.





## Special Considerations

### Computers and work equipment

Computers and work equipment must be individually assigned. Where this is not possible, regular cleaning must be provided for, especially before handing over to another employee.

### Organisation of working times and breaks

When creating shift schedules, care must be taken to assign the same employees to shared shifts where possible in order to reduce the number of different contacts at work. Suitable organisational measures must be taken to prevent gatherings of employees at the beginning and end of working hours (such as at entrance/exit into the workplace, restrooms and breakrooms). Stagger arrival and departure times at work. Reduce congestion by having more entry points into the office or workspace if possible

### Preventing stigma

Everyone has a role to play in preventing stigma related to COVID19. Employers should provide information ([covid19health.gov.mt](https://covid19health.gov.mt)) about virus transmission in order to prevent stigma related to COVID19 in the workplace. Diseases including COVID19 can make anyone sick, regardless of their age, race or ethnicity. Someone who has completed his quarantine is not a source of infection to other people.

Support an employee who is COVID19 positive and in quarantine. Keep in regular contact with the employee and address fears and concerns. Maintain social contact through phone calls and video chats. Arrange for food or essential supplies to be delivered to them if necessary.

### Common areas

Work collaboratively with landlords and other tenants in multi-tenant buildings to ensure safety in common areas, receptions, lifts and staircases

### Getting ready to operate with community spread of COVID-19

- ✓ Develop a contingency and continuity plan for an outbreak. The plan will help prepare for the possibility of an outbreak of COVID- 19.
- ✓ The plan should address how to keep the office running if a significant number of employees, contractors and suppliers cannot come to your place





of business - either because they are on obligatory quarantine or because they are ill.

- ✓ Communicate with your employees and contractors about the business continuity plan. Make sure they are aware of what they need to do – or not do – under the plan. Emphasize key points such as the importance of staying away from work even if they have only mild symptoms.
- ✓ Be sure your plan addresses the mental health and social consequences of a case of COVID-19 and offer information and support.

### Clients and contractors attending the office

- ✓ Non-essential visits to the office should not be allowed. Family members of staff, particularly children, should not be allowed inside the office.
- ✓ Minimise the number of workers attending to clients, deliveries and contractors as much as possible.
- ✓ Clients should be given clear instructions of requirements while they are in the office.
- ✓ Clients, contractors and other visitors should wear a mask or visor.
- ✓ Acrylic or tempered glass screens should separate staff from clients.
- ✓ Contractors who need to provide maintenance or repair services or perform other essential activities, should be given clear instructions of requirements while they are in the office.
- ✓ Ensure hand washing facilities, or if not possible, alcohol-based hand sanitizer, is readily available for workers, particularly after socially interacting with clients or handling deliveries.
- ✓ Use, and ask clients, delivery persons and contractors to use, electronic paperwork where possible, to minimise social interaction.
- ✓ Where possible, set up alternatives to requiring signatures. If a pen or other utensil is required for signature, ask that the pen or utensil is cleaned or sanitised before use or use your own.

### Cleaning and disinfecting measures

A combination of cleaning and disinfection will be most effective in removing any contamination on the virus responsible for causing COVID-19. Offices must be cleaned at least daily. Cleaning with detergent and water is sufficient. Once clean, surfaces can be disinfected. When and how often the office or workspace should be disinfected will depend on the likelihood of contaminated material being present. Alternatively, cleaners may be able to do a 2-in-1 clean and disinfection by using a combined detergent and disinfectant.



## How to clean and disinfect

Cleaning means to physically remove germs (bacteria and viruses), dirt and grime from surfaces using a detergent and water solution. A detergent is designed to break up oil and grease with the use of water. Anything labelled as a detergent will work. Cleaning should start with the dirtiest surface first, progressively moving towards the cleanest surface. When surfaces are cleaned, they should be left as dry as possible to reduce the risk of slips and falls, as well as spreading of viruses and bacteria through droplets.

Disinfecting means using chemicals to kill germs on surfaces. It is important to clean before disinfecting because dirt and grime can reduce the ability of disinfectants to kill germs. Disinfectants containing  $\geq 70\%$  alcohol, ammonium compounds, chlorine bleach or oxygen bleach are suitable for use on hard surfaces (surfaces where liquids pool, and do not soak in). The packaging or manufacturer's instructions will outline the correct way to use disinfectant. Disinfectants require time to be effective at killing viruses. If no time is specified, the disinfectant should be left for ten minutes before removing.

## Which areas should be cleaned and disinfected, and how often?

Any surfaces that are frequently touched should be prioritised for cleaning, e.g. door handles, counters, phones, computers, equipment, Perspex screens (if installed) and sanitary facilities (such as toilets). Any surfaces that are visibly dirty, or have a spill, should be cleaned as soon as they are identified, regardless of when they were last cleaned.

Certain areas within offices may need to be cleaned and disinfected every day. Those sections that have many clients entering each day (reception, waiting areas, delivery bays), more frequent disinfection is recommended. On the other hand, for a work environment (e.g. a warehouse) that is only attended by the same small work crew each day and involves little interaction with other people, routine disinfection in addition to daily cleaning may not be needed.

## What should cleaners wear?

In most circumstances, it will not be necessary for cleaners to wear protective clothing to clean the office. However, workers should use personal protective equipment that is necessary for the products they are using. Gloves and a disposable apron are the minimum requirements. Uniforms or personal clothes that can be washed afterwards are suitable.