



# Social distancing in the workplace

## Context

Everyone must practise social distancing to slow the spread of coronavirus. Social distancing in the workplace means, where possible:

- allowing 4m<sup>2</sup> per person in any environment
- staying at least 1.5 metres away from other people e.g. when exercising, visiting the supermarket or a medical centre
- limiting the size of gatherings i.e. no more than 10 people together indoors or outdoors at any time
- advising against hand shaking and other physical contact.

Gatherings at an office building, factory, mining site, construction site or other place of work that is necessary for the normal business of those premises are permitted, except where they are prohibited by Directions under the Emergency Management Act.

Should a colleague return a positive result to COVID-19, applying these measures in the workplace may assist in reducing the number of staff required to self-isolate due to being identified as close contacts.

A close contact of a confirmed case of COVID-19 is required to self-isolate until 14 days after the last close contact with the confirmed case.

A close contact is defined by the Communicable Diseases Network Australia as:

- a person having greater than 15 minutes cumulative, over the course of a week, face-to-face contact in any setting with a confirmed or probable case  
or
- sharing a closed space with a confirmed or probable case for a prolonged period i.e. greater than 2 hours in the period extending from 4 hours before the onset of signs and symptoms in the confirmed or probable case.

## General workplace management

All workplaces are configured differently and pose unique challenges to social distancing. It is recognised that a workplace or business with staff that are required to self-isolate may create staff shortages which may be damaging to the workplace. Some general actions that may be applied to a variety of workplaces to help achieve social distancing include:

1. Ensure all staff understand the importance of monitoring their own health and direct them to stay at home if they are feeling unwell. If being absent from work risks placing the staff member in financial hardship, information and services for employees and businesses affected by COVID-19 can be found on the [Centrelink website](#).

2. Emphasize the importance of maintaining good hygiene to all staff. Hand washing or using an alcohol-based hand sanitiser frequently, avoiding hand shaking, avoid sharing food or drinks and

practising good cough and sneeze etiquette i.e. cough or sneeze into your elbow or tissue, dispose of tissue and immediately wash hands, will all help to reduce the spread of disease. Review staff kitchen areas to ensure appropriate cleaning of utensils and crockery and limit the number of people in the kitchen area at any one time.

3. Other considerations depend on the size and type of workplace, but may include:

- Rostering considerations: staggering shifts and breaks to limit the amount of contact staff have between each other.
- Staff skills mix: try to avoid rostering/allocating all senior staff to the same shift/area.
- Staff allocations: try to allocate staff to work with the same staff, in the same area, to avoid the amount of contact between large numbers of staff. This has been described as a staff pod/pool. (e.g. in a kitchen allocate the staff to a particular bench/task each day, in a healthcare facility allocate staff to the same rooms each shift, in a supermarket allocate staff to a particular aisle or checkout).
- Allocating areas for staff to have their tea/meal/rest breaks e.g. staff working together, have the same break time and have a table allocated to them in the tea room.
- Allocating staff change rooms and bathroom facilities.
- Allocating dedicated resources and equipment to the same staff to limit sharing of items between employees e.g. tools, kitchen appliances, vehicles.
- Limit visitors to the service such as company representatives to avoid staff unnecessarily having to move between areas to facilitate the visit.
- Allow fresh air to enter the work area as much as possible.
- Emphasize the importance of and provide products for staff to frequently clean commonly touched areas such as work stations, tables, chairs, equipment, door handles and lift buttons. Try to allow for 1.5 metres between staff as much as possible. For example, in a meeting room or a waiting area space chairs apart or remove every second chair. At desks and work stations space chairs apart or remove chairs to provide adequate space.
- At service counters, tape the floor or provide a barrier to keep people 1.5 metres away from service counter staff.
- Facilitate video conferencing for team or business meetings.
- Try to encourage staff to arrive/leave enclosed areas in the same order. Such as in a lift or a meeting room. This will help to reduce staff intermingling.
- Temperature and health checking of staff arriving to work each day is not currently a Department of Health recommendation, however some workplaces have found that this is a good way for employers to keep reminding staff of the importance to monitor their own health.
- The employer should keep a concise and documented record of staff for each shift, their allocated areas and the steps taken to maintain social distancing. In the event of a staff member returning a positive result to COVID-19, comprehensive record keeping will assist Public Health staff to conduct timely and accurate contact tracing i.e. working out who has been in close contact with the positive case and who has not.

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