

Food processing and manufacturing: Minimising the risk of exposure to COVID-19

The model Work Health and Safety (WHS) laws require employers* to take care of the health, safety and welfare of their workers and others at the workplace. This includes:

- > providing and maintaining a work environment that is without risk to health and safety;
- > adequate and accessible facilities for the welfare of workers in carrying out their work; and
- > monitoring the health of workers and the conditions of the workplace for the purpose of preventing illness or injury.

As an employer, you must identify risks at the workplace, and where possible eliminate or minimise those risks.

Food processing and manufacturing workers are at risk of exposure to COVID-19

Food processing and manufacturing is an essential element of the food supply chain and workers in this industry are essential to maintaining a secure supply of food to the community. Due to the nature of the work, many workers cannot work from home and must continue to interact with workers and other persons in their workplace.

Workers and other persons in close proximity to one another increases the risk of exposure to COVID-19. You must do everything reasonably practicable to keep these workers a safe physical distance apart of at least 1.5 meters.

You must implement control measures to minimise the spread of COVID-19 and ensure that other measures to address well known work health and safety risks continue to be implemented. This is the case even if implementing control measures result in delays or disruption to your work.



Managing the risks of exposure to COVID-19

Physical distancing

[Physical distancing](#) – keeping everyone at the workplace at least 1.5 metres physically apart – will be challenging in some food processing and manufacturing workplaces, but it is a key measure to minimise the spread of COVID-19. Where reasonably practicable:

- > Limit physical interactions between workers.
 - > Review tasks and processes that usually require close interaction and identify ways to modify these to increase physical distancing between workers where practical and safe to do so.
 - > Consider if plant can be used to reduce the number of workers interacting.
 - > Postpone non-essential gatherings or training.
 - > For essential gatherings, conduct in spaces that enable workers to keep the required physical distance of at least 1.5 metres, ideally outdoor spaces.
 - > Split workers' shifts to reduce the number of workers onsite at any given time.
 - > Allow additional time between shifts to limit staff interaction and enable time for cleaning.
 - > Use methods such as mobile phone or radio to communicate.
 - > Reducing the number of workers utilising common areas at a given time (e.g. by staggering meal breaks and start times).
 - > Spread out furniture in common areas.
 - > Workers who can work from home (e.g. office staff) should work from home.
- > Eliminate or limit visitors. Conduct meetings by phone or video conference where required.
- > Limit worker numbers on the food production floor.
 - > Reduce the number of tasks to be completed each day.
 - > Postpone non-essential work.
- > Place [signage](#) about physical distancing around the workplace.

You should put processes in place to regularly monitor and review the implementation of [physical distancing](#) measures to ensure they remain effective.

If physical distancing measures introduce new health and safety risks (e.g. because they impact communication), you need to manage those risks too. In addition, any changes to staffing or other arrangements should be made with consideration to maintaining food safety controls.

The Safe Work Australia website has links to a range of [of posters and resources](#) to help remind workers and others of the risks of COVID-19 and the measures that are necessary to stop its spread.

Health checks and quarantine

You must monitor your workers for key symptoms of COVID-19, such as fever.



- > Direct all workers (whether they are at the workplace or not) to report to you if:
 - > they are experiencing any symptoms
 - > they have been, or have potentially been, exposed to a person who has been diagnosed with COVID-19 or is suspected to have COVID-19 (even if the person who is suspected to have COVID-19 has not yet been tested), or
 - > they have undertaken, or are planning to undertake, any travel.
- > Stop workers working if they are displaying symptoms.
- > Stop workers who have contracted COVID-19 from returning to the workplace until they provide evidence they are clear of the virus.

Hygiene

Environmental cleaning

The amount of time COVID-19 survives on objects and surfaces will vary. Environmental cleaning is one way to remove COVID-19 particles.

Usual cleaning schedules will need to be increased.

- > Frequently touched surfaces, including handrails and doors, should be cleaned regularly using appropriate detergent solutions. Once cleaned, they should ideally be disinfected regularly using appropriate disinfectant solutions.
- > Personal items in the workplace, such as glasses and phones, should be frequently cleaned and, ideally, disinfected (e.g. by using isopropyl alcohol wipes).
- > Workplace amenities including kitchens, lunch rooms, communal areas, change rooms, toilets, showers, drink fountains and vending machines, should be cleaned industrially and the frequency of this cleaning should increase.

Also consider reducing the number of touch points for workers. For example, leaving access doors open, where appropriate.

Workers should be provided with cleaning agents and trained to clean down and disinfect plant, equipment and food touch surfaces immediately after use and/or at the end of their shifts.

Workers should each be provided with their own equipment if possible.

To minimise the risk of exposure to the COVID-19 virus the person cleaning should wear gloves and wash their hands or use alcohol-based hand sanitiser before and after wearing gloves.

Gloves and alcohol-based hand sanitiser should be made available

Workplaces should provide closed bins for workers where appropriate to hygienically dispose of waste and rubbish such as used tissues, immediately (or if away from amenities, as soon as possible) after use. Alcohol-based hand sanitiser should be available for workers to use after they dispose of their waste.

If the increased availability of hand sanitiser introduces new health and safety risks (e.g. accidental ingestion by children), you need to identify and manage those risks too.

You must monitor workplace conditions, including facilities, to ensure the measures in place to eliminate or manage the risks arising from COVID-19 are efficient and effective.

See Safe Work Australia's [Cleaning to prevent the spread of COVID-19 fact sheet](#) or the Department of Health information sheet on [Environmental cleaning and disinfection-principles for COVID-19](#) for further information.

Worker hygiene

Workers must practice [good hygiene](#). Workers must wash their hands with soap and water for at least 20 seconds. Hand washing should be done before and after eating and after going to the toilet. Other hygiene measures should include:

- > covering coughs and sneezes with an elbow or a tissue
- > disposing of tissues properly
- > using alcohol-based hand sanitisers with at least 60% ethanol or 70% isopropanol as the active ingredient
- > cleaning and disinfecting surfaces and shared equipment
- > washing body, hair (including facial hair) and clothes thoroughly every day
- > staying more than 1.5 metres away from others, and
- > reporting and staying home if experiencing any symptoms.

In addition, to prevent the spread of COVID-19, workers should also:

- > avoid touching their face
- > avoid handshakes or any other close physical contact
- > refrain from spitting at all times, and
- > put cigarette butts in the bin.

To enhance worker hygiene standards, you should also:

- > adequately delineate between work and common areas. This could include reminding workers (with [posters](#) or through training) to wash their hands with soap and water for at least 20 seconds or sanitise their hands with alcohol-based hand sanitiser, before entering and exiting a common area.
- > inform workers of workplace etiquette and standards that are expected when utilising these common areas (cleaning up after yourself, placing rubbish in bins provided, avoiding putting items such as phones on meal surfaces, etc.)

You should put processes in place to regularly monitor and review the implementation of hygiene measures to ensure they remain effective.

Adequate and accessible facilities

You must ensure there are adequate and accessible facilities to support the implementation of measures to achieve physical distancing and [good hygiene](#).

Washroom facilities must be properly stocked and have adequate supplies of soap, water and toilet paper. Washroom facilities must be kept clean and in good working order. Workplaces should also be well stocked with alcohol-based hand sanitiser..

Consider whether there are an adequate number of hand washing stations to sustain the increase in workers practicing good hygiene.

If creating a new eating or common area to enable physically distancing, you must ensure these areas are adequately equipped (e.g drinking water, rubbish bins), and protected from the elements, contaminants and hazards.

You must ensure all facilities are in good working order and are clean and safe.

For further information on providing adequate and accessible facilities see the [Model Code of Practice: Managing the work environment and facilities](#).

Deliveries and other contractors attending the workplace

Non-essential visits to the workplace should be cancelled or postponed.

Deliveries and other contractors who need to attend the workplace should be given clear instructions of your requirements while they are on site.

Minimise the number of workers attending to deliveries and contractors as much as possible. Make alcohol-based sanitiser available for workers after physically handling deliveries.

Direct visiting truck drivers to remain in vehicles and use contactless methods such as mobile phones to communicate with your workers wherever possible.

Use, and ask deliveries and contractors to use, electronic paper work where possible, to minimise physical interaction. Where possible, set up alternatives to requiring signatures. For instance, see whether a confirmation email or a photo of the loaded or unloaded goods can be accepted as proof of delivery or collection (as applicable). If a pen or other utensil is required for signature you can ask that the pen or utensil is cleaned or sanitised before use. For pens, you may wish to use your own.

Keep workers informed

You must provide all workers information about the risks of exposure to the COVID-19 virus. Where required, workers should be trained in infection control.

The Australian Government Department of Health has a range [of posters and other resources](#) aimed at educating the public about COVID-19.

Consultation and communicating with workers

You must consult with your workers on health and safety matters relating to COVID-19. This means you must consult when:

- > assessing the risk COVID-19 presents to the health and safety of workers
- > deciding on the control measures to put in place to eliminate or minimise the risk of exposure to COVID-19
- > deciding on the adequacy of facilities for the welfare of workers (e.g. hand washing facilities), and



- > proposing other changes to the workplace as a result of COVID-19 which may affect health and safety.

If you and the workers have agreed to procedures for consultation, the consultation must be in accordance with those procedures.

You must allow workers to express their views and raise work health and safety issues that may arise directly or indirectly because of COVID-19. You must take the views of workers into account when making decisions and advise workers of your decision.

Workers are most likely to know about the risks of their work. Involving them will help build commitment to this process and any changes.

Consultation does not require consensus or agreement but you must allow your workers to be part of the decision making process for COVID-19 related matters.

If workers are represented by Health and Safety Representatives (HSRs) you must include them in the consultation process.

The [model Code of Practice: Work health and safety consultation, cooperation and coordination](#) can provide more information about your duties to consult.

You need to communicate clearly with workers about control measures. This means providing clear direction and guidance about what is expected of workers. Workers must know:

- > when to stay away from the workplace
- > what action to take if they become unwell
- > what symptoms to be concerned about.

You should remind workers they have a duty to take reasonable care for their own health and safety and to not adversely affect the health and safety of others.

You should provide workers with a point of contact to discuss their concerns, and access to support services, including employee assistance programs. A list of support services to help workers is provided below.

How can I meet my officer duty during the COVID-19 outbreak?

- > Keep your knowledge of the COVID-19 situation up-to-date. Follow advice from authoritative sources such as the Australian Government Department of Health and check daily for any updates to safety advice.
- > Ensure you understand your business and its WHS hazards and risks. Risk assessments are a useful tool to help identify WHS hazards and risks, as well as strategies to help manage them. Where you have risk assessments in place, they may need to be reviewed to ensure they are up to date.
- > Make sure your premises are properly resourced to manage WHS risks during the COVID-19 outbreak, and check that the resources are being used.
- > Review your policies, procedures and reporting process to ensure they remain current for any incidents, hazards and other WHS issues that arise during this time. Update these materials if necessary.
- > Ensure these are communicated clearly and processes are being followed.

- > Consult with workers and ensure there is a means for them to raise any concerns about the steps you are taking to manage the risks.

Further information is available on [who is an officer in the workplace](#) and their [health and safety duty](#).

Further information and resources

SWA materials

- > [Managing the work environment and facilities model Code of Practice](#)
- > [How to manage work health and safety risks model Code of Practice](#)
- > [Officer Duties](#)
- > For general advice for employers on managing risks to exposure to the COVID-19 virus, go to [COVID-19 Information for workplaces](#)

Other useful resources

- > [Food Standards Australia and New Zealand – Novel coronavirus and food safety](#)
- > [Dairy Food Safety Victoria – COVID-19 and dairy food safety](#)
- > [Food Authority NSW – Food businesses and COVID-19 \(Coronavirus\)](#)
- > [Safe Food QLD – COVID-19: Advice for food businesses](#)
- > [Commonwealth Department of Agriculture, Water and the Environment: Food and Agriculture and COVID-19](#)
- > [Dairy Australia – Dairy industry COVID-19 \(novel coronavirus\) directory](#)

Support resources

- > [Fair Work Ombudsman – Coronavirus and Australian workplace laws](#)
- > [Australian Government Treasury – Support for Businesses](#)
- > [Australian Tax Office – COVID-19: information for small business](#)
- > Australian Government Coronavirus app ([Apple App Store](#), [Google Play](#))
- > [World Health Organisation – Advice for workplaces](#)
- > Information on the recent restrictions announced by the Australian Government is available at [Australia.gov.au](#)

Other support services

- > [Beyond Blue Coronavirus Mental Wellbeing Support Service](#)
- > [Australian Small Business and Family Enterprise Ombudsman](#)
- > [Heads Up – Healthy workplaces support](#)
- > [Lifeline](#)

*Please note. To ensure this information is accessible and easy to understand, it talks about employer responsibilities. Under the model WHS laws, duties apply to a broader range of people than just employers. Any person conducting a business or undertaking (PCBU) is covered by the model WHS laws.

For more information see the [Interpretive Guideline – model Work Health and Safety Act – the meaning of ‘person conducting a business or undertaking’](#).