Employer Guidance for employees who have to self-isolate due to COVID-19

(Version 1: 9 November 2020)

Introduction

The Public Health Agency (PHA) has advised that employers should support their employees who need to comply with COVID-19 public health self-isolation guidelines. This support would include **not** requiring a return to work before the necessary isolation period is completed.

PHA advise self-isolation for employees who have any of the following:

- symptoms of COVID-19; or
- a confirmed positive COVID-19 test; or
- any other reason e.g. a close contact of a positive case.

Self-isolation is recognised as a key intervention in preventing the spread of the virus in the community including workplaces. In a workplace setting, this measure not only protects employees but also helps to sustain business continuity.

Detailed information on support for employees can be found at **AdviceNI** at the link below**.**

- [Have you been affected by the Covid-19 outbreak – Advice NI](#)

Self-isolation when an employee develops symptoms

The key COVID-19 symptoms for employers and employees to be aware of are:

- A new continuous cough (this means coughing a lot for more than one hour or 3 or more coughing episodes in a 24 hour period). If they usually have a cough, it may be worse than usual; or

- Fever/high temperature considered to be 37.8 degrees Celsius or above (this means the temperature before taking any medication to reduce the temperature e.g. paracetamol, ibuprofen or any other antipyretic); or,

- loss of, or change in, sense of smell or taste.

It is essential that any employee who has symptoms of COVID-19 does **not** attend work and follows the Public Health advice summarised below to stay at home and self-isolate. Employers should ensure that all of their employees are made aware of this requirement.

Furthermore, any employee in the workplace exhibiting COVID-19 symptoms while at work, should be sent home **immediately** to self-isolate, wear a face covering on the journey home and avoid public transport. They will need to arrange to be tested and can book a test by visiting www.pha.site/cvtesting or by ringing 119.

If the test is **positive**, they need to continue to self-isolate for at least 10 days from the date their symptoms started. The business need not close but should follow cleaning guidance and review existing measures to reduce the COVID-19 risk. More information at the link below:

- COVID-19: cleaning in non-healthcare settings outside the home – GOV.UK

If the test result is **inconclusive**, the employee must self-isolate for 10 days from the onset of symptoms. They should book a repeat test provided the onset of symptoms was less than 5 days ago.

If the test result is **negative** they can stop self-isolating as long as:

- they feel well enough

- anyone they live with who has symptoms of COVID-19 has tested negative – they need to keep self-isolating if someone in their household tests positive, or develops symptoms of COVID-19 and has not yet been tested

- they are not a close contact of a confirmed case

It should be recognised that there is potential for false negative test results. If there is strong suspicion that the employee has COVID-19, e.g. after discussion with their doctor, they should still isolate for 10 days, even if their test was negative. This should be risk assessed on an individual basis with clinical advice, taking account of factors such as the symptoms and known exposure to a COVID-19 case.

If the employee develops new or worsening symptoms, they should self-isolate and can arrange to be re-tested.

Ending self-isolation

Self-isolation can end when a person does not pose a risk of infecting others. Therefore, an employee with suspected or confirmed COVID-19 can return to work **10 days after** their symptoms started if they feel well enough and provided they have not had a high temperature for at least 48 hours (without taking medicines to treat a high temperature); and **even** if they still have a cough or loss of sense of smell/taste, as these symptoms can last for several weeks after the infection has gone. If they still have a high temperature they should continue to stay at home and seek medical advice.

If the employee has diarrhoea or is being sick, they should stay at home until 48 hours after these symptoms have stopped.

If an employee's test is negative they can stop self-isolating and return to work as long as they feel well enough, have not had a high temperature for at least 48 hours and provided that they are not a close contact of a confirmed case and that anyone they live with who has symptoms of COVID-19 has tested negative. They need to keep self-isolating if someone in their household tests positive, or develops symptoms of COVID-19 and has not yet been tested. If they develop new or worsening symptoms they should continue to self-isolate and arrange a further test.

Again it should be recognised that there is potential for false negative test results. If there is strong suspicion that the employee has COVID-19, e.g. after discussion with their doctor, they should still isolate for 10 days, even if their test was negative. This should be risk assessed on an individual basis with clinical advice, taking account of factors such as the symptoms and known exposure to a COVID-19 case.

Actions for the workplace following an employee testing positive for COVID-19

PHA have provided a quick reference guide for employers entitled *COVID-19 in a business setting* outlining what action should be taken if an employee or someone else at work tests positive. An employee who tests positive for COVID-19 will be required to self-isolate for at least 10 days after the onset of their symptoms or their positive result if they do not have symptoms. It is important to understand that some people who have a positive test can have either none or very mild symptoms. However, they are infectious and can transmit the virus to others and therefore they must adhere to the guidelines on self-isolation.

It should be recognised that self-isolation can be difficult for individuals and impact on wellbeing. Advice on wellbeing while staying at home is available at:

- [Coronavirus (COVID-19): Taking care of your mental health and wellbeing – nidirect](#)

- [Mental wellbeing while staying at home – NHS](#)

Repeat testing prior to return to work

Following the expiry of the self-isolation period and in the absence of symptoms indicated above, there is **no requirement to re-test** employees before re-starting work as tests may remain positive for some time following recovery, despite the vast majority of individuals not being contagious after 10 days from symptom onset.

Contact tracing for employees with a positive test including close contacts in the workplace

The PHA Contact Tracing Service (CTS) will be in touch with an employee who has tested positive (the case) to identify all their Close Contacts - including those at work or in other businesses they may have visited.

If your employees have been informed by the CTS that they should isolate, as an employer you should immediately ensure they are not at

work. They may feel well (the virus could still be incubating) or indeed for some they may not become unwell at all – however both categories must stay at home and self-isolate for the full 14 days. You can ask them to work from home if they are able to and they are not unwell.

Not everyone the employee has been in contact within the workplace will be deemed to be close contacts. The CTS will contact positive employees and ask them to identify their close contacts. More information is available at:

- [Contact Tracing – Public Health Agency](#)

The CTS will contact all close contacts (which may include other employees) and they will be told to self-isolate for **14 days**.   If they develop symptoms they should proceed to book a test. Employees who are close contacts should NOT book tests unless they develop symptoms. Employees must complete the full 14 days self-isolation even if they receive a negative test result.

If there are two or more positive cases of employees having COVID-19, the PHA may contact the employer to discuss any actions they need to take. This could mean enhanced cleaning, testing of all employees or other preventive measures to break the chain of infection. These are determined by the PHA on a case by case basis. The PHA may also involve HSENI or the district council.

Other instances when employees will need to self-isolate

1. Employees must self-isolate for 14 days if they live with (or are in a support bubble with) someone who:

- has symptoms of coronavirus and tested positive; had an unclear result or did not have a test; or
- tested positive but has not had symptoms.

This is because it can take 14 days for symptoms to appear.

The 14 days starts from when the first person in the home or support bubble started having symptoms or the day they tested positive, if they have not had symptoms. Self-isolating can be stopped after 14 days if the employee does not get symptoms.

If the employee develops symptoms, they should get tested. If the test is negative, they must continue self-isolating for the rest of the 14 days, as they could still go on to develop COVID-19 at any point in this period. If the test is positive, they must self-isolate for 10 days from when their symptoms started. This might mean self-isolating for longer than 14 days overall.

2. Self-isolation for 14 days will also apply to an employee who either:

- gets a text, email or call from CTS telling them to self-isolate, or

- gets an alert from the StopCOVID NI app telling them to self-isolate.

This is because they've been in close contact with someone who has coronavirus and there's a chance they might have caught it. As outlined above, self-isolation is for 14 days because it can take 14 days for symptoms to appear. A negative test result during this period does not negate the need to complete the full 14 day isolation period.

An employer, if they wish, may ask the employee to provide a self-isolation note. Further information on this is available from:

- [Isolation note – NHS](#)

3. If an employee has no symptoms but has a positive test they should isolate for 10 days from the date of the test. If they subsequently develop symptoms during the 10 days, they must begin a new 10 self-isolation period.

4. Employees who have arrived in Northern Ireland from certain countries may have to quarantine for 14 days and should not attend work during this period.

More information, including which countries are exempt, is available at

- [Coronavirus (COVID-19): Travel advice – nidirect](#)

In Summary

- Self-isolation is an important measure to prevent the transmission of Covid-19 and employers should support employees who are required to self-isolate;
- Anyone who has symptoms must isolate straight away and should be tested.
- Anyone who has tested positive for COVID-19 must self-isolate for a minimum of 10 days from when their symptoms began or date of the test if they do not develop symptoms; If an employee's test result is negative and they have not been identified as a close contact of a COVID-19 case, then they do not need to continue to self-isolate unless there is strong clinical suspicion they have COVID-19. They can return to work provided they are well.
- Close contacts of someone of has tested positive will have to self-isolate for 14 days. This could mean colleagues of an employee with symptoms may have been close contacts, and so may be asked by CTS to self-isolate if that employee tests positive;
- CTS may require someone to self-isolate even if they previously tested positive for coronavirus and have recovered;
- Self-isolation of employees may be required on more than one occasion;
- Some employees may be tested without experiencing symptoms, and if they are confirmed to have the disease they would be required to self-isolate for 10 days from the date of the test. If symptoms develop, they will need to self-isolate for 10 days from the onset of their symptoms.

Further information on this and ending self-isolation is available at:

- [Covid-19 in a business setting – Public Health Agency](#)

- [Coronavirus (Covid-19): self-isolating – nidirect](#)

- [Coronavirus: information for the public Frequently Asked Questions – Public Health Agency](#)