

COVID-19 (coronavirus)

Questions and answers for Health and Social Care Staff

Staff from across Health and Social Care have pulled together to help tackle the COVID-19 (coronavirus) outbreak preparations and continue to work tirelessly to ensure that our patients, clients, staff and public are as safe as possible. It is only through the ongoing teamwork of our HSC staff across our services that we will be able to tackle the spread of COVID-19 (coronavirus).

The following questions and answers are set out below to advise and guide staff regarding important employment related issues. The situation relating to COVID-19 (coronavirus) is continually evolving and therefore these questions and answers will be subject to ongoing review and amendment as appropriate.

General information:

1. What is COVID-19 (coronavirus)?

Coronaviruses are a large family of viruses that are common across the world. These viruses can cause mild symptoms ranging from a fever and cough to more serious conditions such as severe pneumonia, shortness of breath and breathing difficulties.

In December 2019, a new strain of coronavirus (COVID-19) was first identified in Wuhan City, Hubei, China. This virus has now spread to other countries. The UK Chief Medical Officers have declared the risk to the public to be high, but for most people, COVID-19 (coronavirus) will be a mild illness.

2. What do I need to be aware of in relation to patient/client confidentiality and COVID-19?

The usual strict staff obligations in respect of patient/client confidentiality apply in the context of possible or confirmed diagnosis of COVID-19 (coronavirus). This duty extends to protecting the confidentiality of staff who are being treated as possible or confirmed COVID-19 (coronavirus) patients.

However, under The Public Health Act (Northern Ireland) Doctors in Northern Ireland have a statutory duty to notify the Director of Public Health if they are aware that or have reasonable grounds to suspect that a patient is suffering from one of the notifiable diseases. COVID-19 is now designated as a notifiable disease.

Health, support and self-isolation:

3. My symptoms match those of COVID-19 (coronavirus). What should I do?

Anyone with a new, continuous cough and/or high temperature MUST self-isolate at home for 7 days and follow the stay at home guidance at www.gov.uk/government/publications/covid-19-stay-at-home-guidance/stay-at-home-guidance-for-households-with-possible-coronavirus-covid-19-infection

Staff are required to contact their line manager and occupational health prior to going on sick leave. Leave will be recorded as sick leave on [HRPTS](#) using sickness code IN28 Other Infectious Disease.

4. Will sick leave associated with COVID-19 affect my sickness record?

No, in order to mitigate any risks of COVID-19 (coronavirus) spreading across the organisation it is important that staff with symptoms do not come into the workplace. Sickness absence related to COVID-19 (coronavirus) will not form part of any absence triggers, and will not be viewed as such in relation to a member of staff's sickness absence record. COVID-19 (coronavirus) sickness will be recorded in the normal way by managers, using a specific code on HRPTS, but this is strictly to allow us to monitor and report on the impact of absence(s) across the organisation.

5. Someone I live with has symptoms of COVID-19 (coronavirus). I don't have any symptoms, can I come into work?

No, even if you do not have any symptoms of COVID-19 (as per question 3) you must stay at home for 14 days. Staff should contact their line manager and Occupational Health by telephone and must follow the stay at home guidance at www.gov.uk/government/publications/covid-19-stay-at-home-guidance/stay-at-home-guidance-for-households-with-possible-coronavirus-covid-19-infection

Where you can be facilitated to work from home you should do so. If this is not possible this should be recorded as special leave on [HRPTS](#)

The 14 day period starts from the day when the first person in the house became ill. If you develop symptoms you must stay at home for a further 7 days, regardless of what day you are on in the original 14 day isolation period.

You should contact your line manager by telephone if and when symptoms appear.

6. When should I return to work after self-isolating?

If you were self-isolating due to developing symptoms, you can return to work on day 8 if you do not have a high temperature. If you still have a high temperature, stay at home until your temperature returns to normal.

If you were self-isolating because someone you live with developed symptoms, you can return to work on day 15 provided you remain symptom free. If you subsequently developed symptoms you can return to work 7 days after your symptoms first developed if you do not have a high temperature. If you still have a high temperature, stay at home until your temperature returns to normal.

If your symptoms worsen during home isolation, then you should contact NHS 111 for advice. You should keep in regular contact with your line manager. Managers can contact Occupational Health for advice if required.

7. If I am pregnant, can I continue to work?

The Royal College of Obstetricians & Gynaecologists (RCOG) published updated guidance, Coronavirus (COVID-19) Infection in Pregnancy, on 21 March 2020. This can be found at: www.rcog.org.uk/globalassets/documents/guidelines/2020-03-21-covid19-pregnancy-guidance-2118.pdf

The RCOG guidance advises that subject to taking social distancing precautions at work, pregnant women under 28 weeks with no underlying medical conditions can continue to work. Pregnant women over 28 weeks and those with underlying conditions should take a more

precautionary approach and are strongly advised to follow social distancing advice. Chapter 6 of the RCOG guidance provides more detailed information. This guidance is under active review and we expect it will be updated in due course if/should the need arise.

The current Public Health England advice (updated 20 March 2020) is that those who are at increased risk of severe illness from coronavirus (COVID-19) should be particularly stringent in following social distancing measures. This advice is at www.gov.uk/government/publications/covid-19-guidance-on-social-distancing-and-for-vulnerable-people/guidance-on-social-distancing-for-everyone-in-the-uk-and-protecting-older-people-and-vulnerable-adults

Line managers, in conjunction with Occupational Health where necessary, should use the available guidance as appropriate given the context at hand for individual members of staff, eg gestation, maternal medical history and health status, nature of occupation/healthcare role, nature of the healthcare environment, nature of service provided/delivered, etc.

8. What if I have an underlying health condition, or am over 70?

The current Public Health England advice (updated 20 March 2020) is that those who are at increased risk of severe illness from coronavirus (COVID-19) should be particularly stringent in following social distancing measures. This advice is at www.gov.uk/government/publications/covid-19-guidance-on-social-distancing-and-for-vulnerable-people/guidance-on-social-distancing-for-everyone-in-the-uk-and-protecting-older-people-and-vulnerable-adults

The HSC is awaiting further guidance in respect of staff in these categories.

9. What is the guidance for those with SEVERE underlying medical conditions?

Public Health England issued guidance on 22 March 2020 for people, including children, who are at very high risk of severe illness from coronavirus (COVID-19) because of an underlying health condition, and for their family, friends and carers. It is intended for use in situations where the extremely vulnerable person is living in their own home, with or without additional support.

It is important to protect people who are clinically vulnerable by minimising all interaction between significantly vulnerable and others. We are therefore strongly advising people with serious underlying health conditions (listed below) which put them at very high risk of severe illness from coronavirus (COVID-19) to rigorously follow protective measures in order to keep themselves safe.

People falling into this significantly vulnerable group include:

1. Solid organ transplant recipients
2. People with specific cancers:
 - people with cancer who are undergoing active chemotherapy or radical radiotherapy for lung cancer
 - people with cancers of the blood or bone marrow such as leukaemia, lymphoma or myeloma who are at any stage of treatment
 - people having immunotherapy or other continuing antibody treatments for cancer
 - people having other targeted cancer treatments which can affect the immune system, such as protein kinase inhibitors or PARP inhibitors
 - people who have had bone marrow or stem cell transplants in the last 6 months, or who are still taking immunosuppression drugs

3. People with severe respiratory conditions including all cystic fibrosis, severe asthma and severe COPD.
4. People with rare diseases and inborn errors of metabolism that significantly increase the risk of infections (such as SCID, homozygous sickle cell).
5. People on immunosuppression therapies sufficient to significantly increase risk of infection.
6. Women who are pregnant with significant heart disease, congenital or acquired.

Individuals in these categories will be receiving a letter from the HSC this week to advise that they should **protect themselves** at home at all times and avoid any face-to-face contact for a period of at least 12 weeks from receipt of this letter. Please note that this period of time could change. Please follow the guidance at www.gov.uk/government/publications/guidance-on-shielding-and-protecting-extremely-vulnerable-persons-from-covid-19

Staff in the above categories who receive a letter will be facilitated to work from home, where possible. Staff are required to discuss with their line manager, seeking Occupational Health advice as necessary, how they can be facilitated to work at home. Where working from home is not possible, staff will remain at home on special paid leave. If suitable work becomes available your manager will contact you.

10. I am afraid I might get infected with COVID-19 (coronavirus) and pass it on to someone in my home who is in a vulnerable category. Do I have to come into work?

The HSC is mindful of the increased anxiety levels of staff during an outbreak and of staff being fearful of putting vulnerable members of their household at risk.

You can find more information on how to help protect vulnerable people you live with at www.gov.uk/government/publications/covid-19-guidance-on-social-distancing-and-for-vulnerable-people

If you live with an extremely vulnerable person you should follow the guidance at www.gov.uk/government/publications/guidance-on-shielding-and-protecting-extremely-vulnerable-persons-from-covid-19

You should of course discuss any of these health concerns with Occupational Health.

Trusts are currently exploring alternative accommodation options to support staff in these situations.

11. Will there be a vaccine for the pandemic and will it be available to staff?

There is currently no vaccine to prevent COVID-19 (coronavirus) but work is ongoing to develop this.

12. Will the seasonal flu vaccine also be available?

The flu vaccine is available up until the end of March 2020.

Caring responsibilities and leave:

13. What are the arrangements for schools to support HSC staff?

The Department of Education has issued guidance to schools that they are to continue to facilitate those children who are vulnerable, or those children up to the end of Year 10, where a parent is critical to the Covid-19 response, who would otherwise have no option but to stay at home to ensure safe supervision of their children.

Everyone working in health and social care is defined as a key worker.

Only one parent needs to be a key worker to be able to access this much needed school support. Only send your child to school if you have no other child care options, which should not be older grandparents/relatives.

Schools are in direct contact with parents /guardians, or visit www.education-ni.gov.uk/news/letter-minister-education-education-sector

14. Are there any other arrangements to support HSC staff with childcare difficulties?

The Department of Health has announced a new Home Childcarer Scheme to allow parents to have their children cared for in their own home. For the duration of the COVID-19 pandemic, a bespoke version of the approved home childcarer scheme has been set up which will enable key workers to be temporarily matched with one of their children's current day care workers.

You can find out more at <https://www.health-ni.gov.uk/publications/covid-19-approved-home-childcare-scheme>

15. I have annual leave booked – will my annual leave be cancelled?

It is important to remember that staffing levels could be depleted significantly, either due to staff being absent to care for dependants or having symptoms themselves. One way of increasing the available pool of staff will be for managers to review those staff who have been granted annual leave and ask them to change arrangements.

While taking into consideration your own individual wellbeing and the need for you to have a break from work, your manager may ask you to postpone your leave. Remember that where holidays have been booked which involve travel to other countries, to check the Foreign and Commonwealth Office (FCO) advice on travel to foreign countries www.gov.uk/guidance/travel-advice-novel-coronavirus

Normal annual leave carry-over arrangements can be relaxed following discussion with your line manager due to the exceptional circumstances. Staff may be requested to work on statutory holidays when this would not be their normal working arrangements. They will be paid in line with their Terms and Conditions for these days and would get an opportunity to take these at a later stage.

Social distancing in the workplace:

16. How will social distancing be handled in the workplace?

Managers should work with their staff to put in place social distancing in office environments to ensure staff can remain 2 metres apart. This may include spreading staff across any available offices or alternative shift patterns, eg early morning or evening working, or weekend working.

Employee concerns and redeployment:

17. Can I refuse to provide services to a patient or client who has COVID-19 (coronavirus)?

The HSC takes very seriously the health of its staff. You should discuss your concerns with your line manager and Occupational Health in the first instance particularly if there are circumstances which might put you at higher risk. However you are generally expected to undertake your normal duties, taking all precautions as specified in relation to infection control measures.

18. How do I ensure I am protected if a patient or client is suspected of or confirmed as having contracted COVID-19 (coronavirus)?

You will be fully briefed and trained on the use of Personal Protective Equipment (PPE) and managers have a responsibility to ensure appropriate PPE is in place for you. Wearing of PPE is mandatory, however we appreciate it can be tiring for staff and therefore you and your manager should ensure that you receive adequate rest breaks to avoid fatigue. You must practise and role model hand hygiene measures, and ensure you follow PHA guidance relating to 'Catch it, Bin it, Kill it'.

19. Am I likely to be redeployed?

We are already seeing a scaling back of a number of services to ensure we are able to plan robustly for the outbreak. It is inevitable that only essential services will be provided in the days and weeks ahead, and therefore some services will be suspended. In accordance with contracts of employment, some staff will be required to redeploy and/or relocate to ensure the provision of essential services to our patients/clients, or to ensure HSC front line staff are adequately supported to deliver health and social care in the most challenging of circumstances. Regulatory bodies are producing guidance for staff in these circumstances and can be accessed from their websites.

Your personal and health circumstances will be taken into account, and our terms and conditions will be adhered to, including provision of excess mileage at business rate.

Responding to COVID-19 is already necessitating the highest level of team working across our service, to ensure our patients, clients and staff are safely cared for. Working together will be more critical than ever before.

20. If I am to be redeployed I am worried about how I will know what to do in a different role. Will I receive training?

Consideration will be given to what is reasonable redeployment and yes, necessary induction and where appropriate relevant training will take place to enable you to take on different duties, however please be assured that you will only be asked to take on tasks within your competence. Where you are working outside your normal role, you should be very mindful of the need to work within your scope of competence and not undertake work which you are not trained or competent to do.

21. If I, as a result of agreed temporary redeployment, am undertaking work of a lower band in another area, will my terms and conditions be protected and will I receive mileage expenses?

Yes, your terms and conditions will be protected if you work in another area during your contracted hours and you will receive mileage payments as appropriate.

Pensions:

22. As part of Covid-19 contingencies, I have returned to HSC employment having very recently retired. Am I able to work more than the 16 hours per week in the first four weeks following retirement?

The legislation announced on 17 March 2020 temporarily suspends the 16-hour rule which currently prevents staff who return to work after retirement from the HSC Pension Scheme from working more than 16 hours per week in the first four weeks after retirement. It will also temporarily suspend abatement for special class status holders in the 1995 section of the Scheme, as well as the requirement for staff in the 2008 Section and 2015 HSC Pension Scheme to reduce their pensionable pay by 10% if they elect to 'draw down' a portion of their benefits and continue working.

These measures will allow skilled and experienced staff who have recently retired from the HSC to return to work, and they will also allow retired staff who have already returned to work to increase their commitments if required, without having their pension benefits abated. This will provide valuable capacity to the HSC.

Travel:

23. What is the advice on travel to or from affected areas?

The HSC does not issue travel advice, if you're concerned about the impact of the COVID-19 outbreak on your existing travel plans, check with your airline, tour operator, cruise line or other transport and accommodation providers as applicable. People who plan to travel must check the Foreign and Commonwealth Office (FCO) travel advice at www.gov.uk/guidance/travel-advice-novel-coronavirus

24. I'm planning to travel in the next few weeks, is that okay?

Staff planning to travel must carefully consider travel plans. Because the situation is changeable, we cannot guarantee what countries may have restrictions, or what procedures will be in place on returning to Northern Ireland.

You must follow FCO travel advice at www.gov.uk/guidance/travel-advice-novel-coronavirus

25. I've recently returned from travelling outside of Northern Ireland, what should I do?

You should carry on as normal unless you develop symptoms of COVID-19.

Courses, training and conferences:

26. What are the arrangements for training, course, conferences during this period of time?

There is an enormous amount of work going on within the HSC to help us plan and prepare for the surge of COVID-19 to ensure we can continue to provide essential services and care for patients and clients. With this in mind, to release staff to focus on this important planning and undertake relevant skills training, a number of decisions have been taken:

- for the foreseeable future we will focus on the mandatory/essential training required to enable the upskilling / training of staff, new starts and returnees required to support essential service delivery during the COVID-19 period;
- all other non-essential events and training will be stood down;
- there will be no attendance at regional, national or international courses and conferences;

and

- there should be no further work related travel booked outside of Northern Ireland, unless authorised by the relevant Director.

This will release staff to focus on the provision of safe, effective and high quality care during this challenging period.

