Building and construction industry: Minimising the risk of exposure to COVID-19

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

> providing and maintaining a work environment that is without risk to health and safety; and

> adequate facilities for workers in carrying out their work.

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

Workers in the building and construction industry are at risk of exposure to COVID-19

The number of workers on a construction project can vary significantly between projects and from day to day. Where workers work closely together it increases the risk of exposure to COVID-19. You must therefore do everything that is reasonably practicable to keep workers a safe physical distance apart of at least 1.5 metres while they are onsite.

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 (e.g Safe Work Method Statements (SWMS)). This is the case even if implementing control measures result in delays to your project schedule or cause disruption.

Managing the risks of exposure to COVID-19

Physical distancing

Keeping physical distancing of at least 1.5 metres between everyone on construction sites will be challenging at times but is a key measure to minimise the spread of COVID-19.

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You must do what you can to reduce the risk of exposure to COVID-19:

> Limit physical interactions between workers, workers and clients, and workers and other persons at the site (e.g. deliveries) and use other methods such as mobile phone or radio to communicate.
> Limit worker numbers on site where possible.
>> Split shifts into AM and PM
>> Reduce the number of tasks to be completed each day
>> Facilitate work from home, where you can.
> Create specific walkways through the construction site to maintain physical separation.
> Stagger meal times and smokos to limit the number of workers congregating in one area. Spread out furniture in crib/break rooms.
> Conduct toolbox and other meetings online, including through an app, where you can. If not, conduct such meetings in wide open spaces to enable workers to keep the required physical distance of at least 1.5 metres.
> Limit the number of workers in the hoist/lift at any one time. Promote the use of stairs but be aware of any indirect risks that may arise from this and cause injuries.
> Prevent queues at hoists/lifts.
> Postpone non-essential training.
> Place signage about physical distancing around the work site where you can.

Nominate responsible persons to make sure your workers are following the rules for physical distancing.

If physical distancing measures introduce new health and safety risks (e.g. because they impact communication), you need to manage those risks too.

The Australian Government Department of Health has a range of posters and other resources aimed at educating the public about COVID-19. These posters can be placed in client-facing work environments (e.g. workplace entrances).

Health checks and quarantine

The health of your workers should be checked 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.
> Encourage workers to report if they observe another worker is displaying any symptoms.
> Prohibit workers working if they are displaying symptoms.
> Prohibit 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.

Construction work inevitably requires regular touching of objects and surfaces. This means that usual cleaning schedules on construction sites will need to be increased.

> Frequently touched surfaces on a construction site, including any plant, equipment, lifts, hoists, handrails and doors, should be cleaned frequently using appropriate detergent or disinfectant solutions.
> Site amenities, including lunch rooms, site offices, change rooms, toilets, showers, drink fountains and vending machines, should be cleaned industrially and the frequency of this cleaning should increase.

To minimise the risk of exposure to COVID-19, the person cleaning should wear gloves and use alcohol-based hand sanitiser before and after wearing gloves. Gloves and hand sanitiser should be made available throughout the construction site. Workers should be trained to clean down plant or equipment immediately after use.

Workplaces should consider limiting or reducing recirculated air-conditioning in common areas.

See the Department of Health information sheet on Environmental cleaning and disinfection-principles for COVID-19 for further information.

Worker hygiene

Workers should be required to practice good hygiene. This includes:

> covering coughs and sneezes with an elbow or a tissue
> disposing of tissues properly
> washing hands often with soap and water for at least 20 seconds, including before and after eating and after going to the toilet
> using alcohol-based hand sanitisers
> cleaning and disinfecting surfaces
> washing body, hair (including facial hair) and clothes thoroughly every day
> staying more than 1.5 metres away from others, and
> staying home if sick.

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.

Washroom facilities on construction sites should have adequate supplies for good hygiene, such as adequate supply of soap, water and toilet paper. Washroom facilities must be kept clean, properly stocked and in good working order.

Construction sites should also be well stocked with alcohol-based hand sanitiser.

You should:

> adequately delineate between the construction site and the common areas. This could include reminding workers (with posters or through training) 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.
> adopt a coordinated approach to reducing the number of workers utilising the common areas at a given time (staggering meal breaks, start times, coordinating work and planning).
> 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.)
> consider reducing the number of touch points for workers. For example, leaving access doors open, where appropriate.

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 hand 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).

Keep workers informed

You should provide all workers information about the risks of exposure to COVID-19. 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 should consult with workers on health and safety matters relating to COVID-19. Allow workers to express views before you make decisions.

You should also consult with other duty holders working on site.

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

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

Communicate clearly with workers about control measures. Provide clear direction and guidance about what is expected of workers.

Workers should know:

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

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.

Provide workers with a point of contact to discuss their concerns, and access to support services, including employee assistance programs.

Further information and Resources

SWA materials

> [Construction Work model Code of Practice](#)
> [Managing the work environment and facilities model Code of Practice](#)

Other useful resources

> [Housing Industry Association COVID-19 (Coronavirus) update](#)
> [Master Builders Victoria – COVID-19 – Guidelines for the building and construction industry Australia](#)
> [Master Builder Association NSW – Coronavirus information](#)

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](#)

Support services

> [Mates in Construction](#)
> [Australian Small Business and Family Enterprise Ombudsman](#)

*Please note. To ensure this webpage 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'.](#)