

# RiskTopic

## Employee Screening and Prevention Policies: Preventing the spread of COVID-19 in the workplace

Establishing appropriate employee screening practices and additional workplace controls to reduce the spread of COVID-19 is important as employees return to the workplace.

### Introduction

Employer intervention is necessary for preventing and/or mitigating the spread of COVID-19 in the workplace. There are many steps an employer can take to reduce the risk of exposing employees to COVID-19. Employers need to be prepared to respond flexibly to the dynamic situation in their community

### Discussion

To slow and reduce the spread of COVID-19 in the workplace employers need to identify ways to maintain a healthy work environment. Before turning to personal protective equipment (PPE), companies should look to administrative and engineering controls to achieve this goal.

Employees need to feel comfortable reporting signs and symptoms of COVID-19 and supervisors and management should be able to recognise common signs and symptoms. Good employee screening practices can help to prevent the spread of COVID-19. Some employers may choose to enhance screening practices by including temperature checks. If this enhancement is implemented, employee confidentiality needs to be maintained. Policies and procedures for identifying and isolating sick individuals may vary according to your industry and varying operations. Identification and isolation provide an additional layer of protection when used in coordination with physical distancing, engineering controls, work practices and personal protective equipment.

### Guidance

Guidance may vary based on the level of community transmission of COVID-19 and the company's interaction with the public, but all employers should take action to prevent the spread of COVID-19.

To reduce transmission amongst employees, employers should do the following:

- Encourage sick employees to stay home
- Identify where and how workers might be exposed to COVID-19 and take steps to reduce or eliminate these exposures
- Educate employees about what they can do to reduce the spread of COVID-19

To help establish and maintain a healthy work environment, employers can do the following:

- Implement flexible sick leave policies
- Establish policies and practices for physical distancing
- Improve current engineering controls, and identify opportunities for added engineering controls
- Perform routine cleaning and disinfection of the workplace
- Make it easy for employees, customers, and visitors to practice good respiratory etiquette and hand hygiene
- Enhance cleaning and disinfecting procedures if an employee is suspected or confirmed to have COVID-19

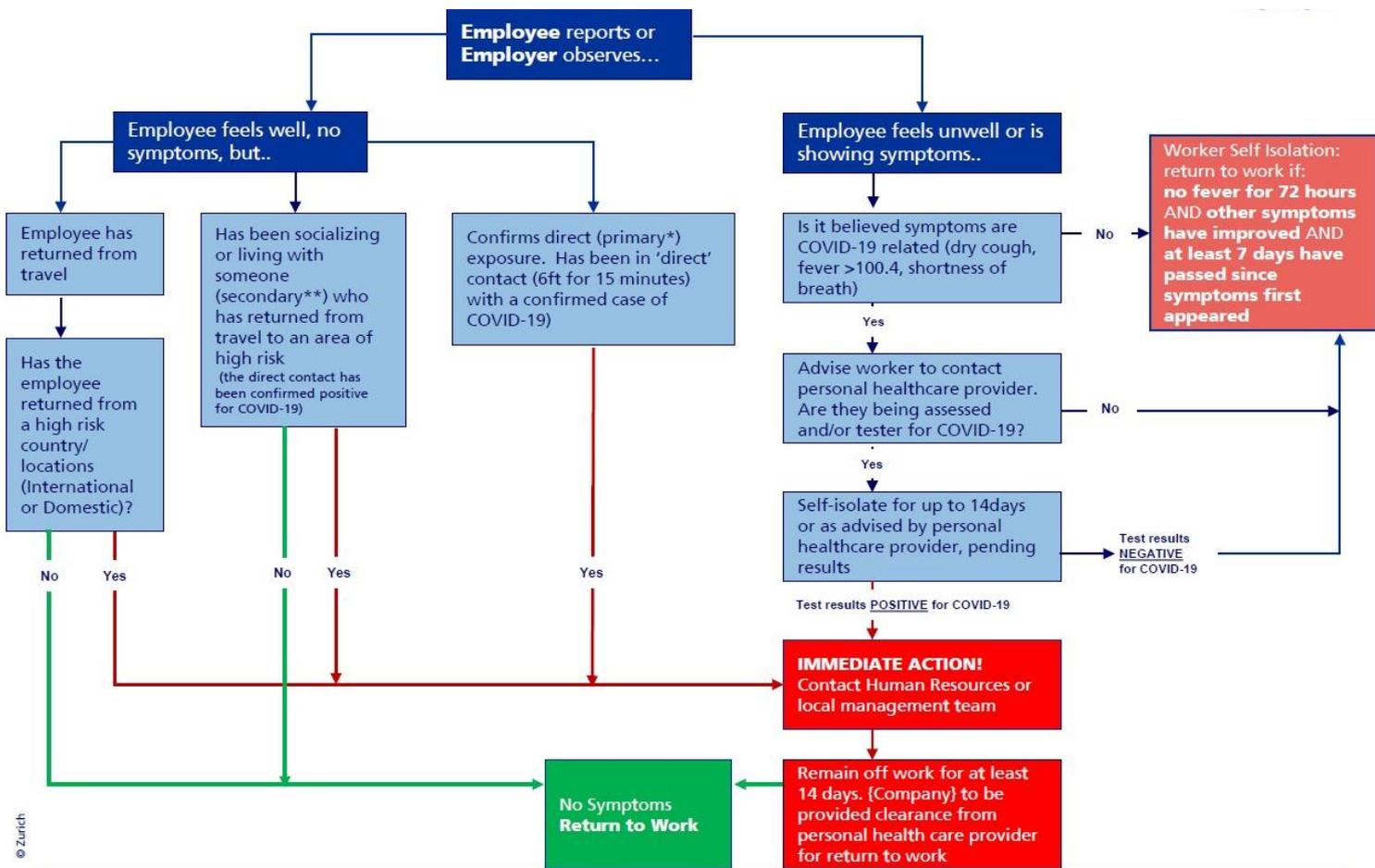
In addition to the controls above, in areas where there is widespread transmission of COVID-19, employers may take employees' temperatures prior to beginning work. Fever is one of the most common symptoms of COVID-19, as is cough and shortness of breath. A fever is classified as a temperature above 38.0° C. While oral thermometers may be used, infrared thermometers (i.e. temporal artery or forehead thermometers) are less invasive and may better support physical distancing. It is important to remember not all individuals with COVID-19 will have a fever.

If your workplace chooses to perform temperature tests, the following considerations should be made:

- The person taking the temperature has requisite knowledge to do so, and can assess the results
- Thermometers should be properly disinfected between uses
- Ensure all personnel understand what will be deemed an elevated temperature
- Employees who appear to have symptoms (fever, cough, shortness of breath) upon arrival at work or who become sick during the day should be immediately separated from other employees, customers and visitors and sent home
- If an employee's temperature is found to be elevated, it should be treated as confidential employee medical information and remain protected while acting on that information
- Maintain documentation of the temperature readings from employees who are sent home due to an elevated temperature. This information should also be treated as confidential employee medical information
- Temperatures should be taken individually in a private space and employees should wait in a line that allows for required physical distancing
- Although there is not specific guidance on necessary personal protective equipment (PPE) for persons taking employee temperatures, engineering controls such as a plexiglass separator and administrative controls should be considered for viability before implementing PPE. If this is not feasible, PPE such as gloves and a face mask or face covering could be considered.

In coordination with your sick leave policy, the most effective way to isolate employees is for those who feel ill to simply stay home. Robust leave policies encourage safe behaviours. Employers should educate employees on the signs and symptoms of COVID-19, as well as the actions they are expected to take should they exhibit signs of illness. Symptoms may appear 2-14 days after exposure and may include fever, cough and shortness of breath. In situations where an employee starts to feel ill after arriving at work, they should be isolated in a designated location until they can be removed from the workplace.

Sample decision tree to help guide decisions related to handling possible cases of COVID-19:



\*Primary contact: if you have been in primary contact (defined as more than 15 minutes at a distance of less than 6ft) with a person with COVID-19

\*\*Secondary contact: if someone in your household has been in primary contact with an infected person, your are a "secondary contact"

## Conclusion

Every employer should take steps to prevent and/or slow the spread of COVID-19. These steps may include engineering controls (e.g. isolation screens), improved safe work practices (e.g. hand hygiene, physical distancing, enhanced cleaning & disinfecting protocols), PPE and administrative controls (e.g. enhanced sick leave policies, employee screening practices). It is important your organisation is doing its part to slow the spread.

## References

Safe Work Australia – Information on COVID-19 and work health and safety

Australian Government Department of Health - Coronavirus (COVID-19) information for employers

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