



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 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;
- > 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.

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 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 photo 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.

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. In addition, any changes to staffing or other arrangements should be made with consideration to maintaining food safety controls.

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

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.
- > 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 frequently using appropriate detergent or disinfectant solutions.
- > Workplace amenities including kitchens, lunch rooms, common areas, change rooms, toilets, showers, drink fountains and vending machines, should be cleaned industrially and the frequency of this cleaning should increase.

Workers should be provided with cleaning agents and trained to clean down 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.

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

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 alcohol-based hand sanitiser should be made available throughout the workplace.

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
- > 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

Washroom facilities 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.

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

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.)

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).

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 must consult with workers on health and safety matters relating to COVID-19. Allow workers to express views before you make decisions.

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

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

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](#)

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](#)

*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’](#).