

Improving ventilation in indoor workplaces: COVID-19

Ensuring heating, ventilation and air conditioning (HVAC) systems are well-maintained and operating properly is important for indoor workplaces to manage the risk of COVID-19 transmission. This includes any risks associated with the HVAC system being restarted after a period of shutdown.

These three steps will help to reduce the risk of COVID-19 transmission and improve ventilation in indoor settings.

The most effective ways to minimise the risk of COVID-19 infection at your workplace is through ensuring physical distancing, maintaining good hygiene and environmental cleaning.

Some industries have specific directions that should be followed (for example, healthcare).

1. Ensure the HVAC system is working properly

HVAC systems are an essential safety measure for most buildings. HVAC systems must always be maintained in accordance with the relevant national regulations to ensure ongoing building compliance, including during the COVID-19 pandemic.

If you do not directly control or manage a HVAC unit or system, you will need to liaise with the building owner or facilities manager to ensure the system is regularly inspected and maintained.

Before you allow your workers to resume work after a period of shutdown, you should confirm with the building owner or facilities manager that the correct start-up procedures and control settings are in place to reduce any risks associated with the HVAC system being restarted.

2. Take steps to improve ventilation for indoor workplaces

You should consider adjusting the settings of your HVAC system to help minimise the risk of COVID-19. This includes not recirculating the air or limiting the level of recirculation.

You can also organise for doors and windows to be opened to increase the intake of fresh air.

If you have exhaust fans in restrooms and other facilities, check they are functional and operating continuously and at full capacity when the building is occupied.

Exhaust should be directed outdoors and away from windows and air intake systems of your building and that of any surrounding buildings. Your building owner or facilities manager can assist you with checking and adjusting air flow at your workplace.

Fans and portable air cleaners or purifiers are safe to use in areas with one person. In areas with more than one person these should only be used where the air is not directly blowing from one person to another and where fresh air is available. If you use fans, air cleaners or purifiers, they need to be maintained and operated in accordance with the manufacturer's instructions.

3. Other things you can do

If you are still concerned about the ventilation in your indoor setting, for example if you are unable to adjust your air conditioning settings or allow fresh air into your workplace, you should consider limiting the number of people at the workplace, or within certain areas of the workplace.

Crowded and noisy places have a higher risk of generating and spreading respiratory droplets. To improve effective ventilation on a per person basis, you should, where possible:

- look at your workplace floorplan and adjust workstations to maintain physical distancing of at least 1.5 metres between workers
- stagger your workers' start, finish and break times
- relocate work tasks to different areas of the workplace, off-site or support workers to work from home, or
- provide teams their own dedicated meal areas or break facilities.

For more resources:

Visit the Safe Work Australia website swa.gov.au/coronavirus