

Occupational health and Covid-19: Don't let controls slip in level 2

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With the impending arrival of a new Occupational Health and Safety (OHS) Direction to ensure health and safety control measures in lockdown level 2, it is important to remember the basics that all employers should have in place. We can't fully avoid Covid-19, but we can avoid unnecessary transmissions through responsible workplace interventions.

Risk assessments are key: Identify the risk and mitigate that risk within reasonable bounds. Encourage healthy behaviours as stipulated in the Health and Safety Direction issued by the Department of Employment and Labour: Wash hands regularly, sanitise hands, wash and sanitise working surfaces, wear masks and other appropriate PPE. Maintain distance (1.5m, or a solid barrier).

Screen for symptoms before every work day or shift starts. That will be key for contact tracing, or to identify any possible failure of a control measure, should a positive case arise. If an employee shows symptoms during the process of symptom screening, isolate the employee and issue them a surgical mask. Inform the Department of Health through the COVID-19 hotline, and do the same with the relevant Department of Employment and Labour inspector (depending on the province).

Contact details for the department of Employment and Labour provincial inspectors can be found at: <http://www.labour.gov.za/About-Us/Ministry/Pages/IES0320-7398.aspx>

If an employee tests positive, identify the team of employees working with the affected employee (if that is the case), and instruct them to self-isolate and monitor their symptoms for 10 days. Sanitise the employee's working area in accordance with the employer's risk assessment. Risk assessment and continuity is key: Smaller teams are easier to rearrange where circumstances allow.

Working from home should be encouraged as far as possible. Managers should be taught how to manage remote teams. Use available technology to ensure that teams remain in touch. Know your people and learn to understand them better.

Guard against stigmatisation. If people feel there are negative consequences to reporting symptoms, they will not report those symptoms. Accept that Covid-19 has health AS WELL AS wellness consequences: All workplace stakeholders have been under immense strain since the beginning of lockdown and that influences behaviour at work. It is never a bad idea to call in reinforcements to assist with changed team dynamics and to teach employees and managers coping skills during this time.