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COVID-19 Essential Workers Guidance

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Introduction

COVID-19: We are all aware of steps being taken to help slow the spread of the COVID-19 virus. Most of this advice is about avoiding large gatherings, maintaining good personal hygiene, avoiding non-essential meetings and minimising close contact with others. This is all good advice.

You are essential: As part of the COVID-19 response, some workers can stop working or work from isolated locations. For essential services workers, such as healthcare and utility staff, work has to continue for the wellbeing of the greater community. The provision of safe drinking water and removal of wastewater is an essential service. It's the most important part of the preventive public health system, protects the environment and provides water for fire-fighting and other essential uses. So, your role is essential to maintain the lifeblood of society.

Keeping you safe: As we know, the top priority for water utilities is keeping staff safe at all times. This guidance note provides some simple advice for improving the safety of ourselves and our co-workers and for helping to reduce the spread of COVID-19 virus at work. Some of us can work in an isolated location, such as from home, and that home may not be set up for working safely. We need to make those workspaces safer in that context. In addition, some of us need to physically get to and from work sites and work in offices, depots, at treatment plants, on sites and at field locations. This guidance provides advice for water utilities on keeping staff safe whilst continuing with that essential work.

The basis for this workplace guidance:

The workplace guidance in place internationally is based on experience observing outbreaks as well as an understanding of the basics about how viruses survive and spread. The COVID-19 virus is new but based on similar viruses we can be confident of the following:

Facts about how the COVID-19 virus spreads help guide workplace health and safety:

- **Direct transmission** involves viruses shed from an infected person in exhaled mucous and droplets from the lungs and throat (when they cough, sneeze or talk) entering the mouth, nose or throat of another person. But those droplets mostly settle within a couple of meters so to directly spread the virus between people they need to be close. Keeping a distance, '**social distancing**', helps stop transmission.
- **Indirect transmission** involves exhaled droplets containing the virus landing on a surface and then being transferred to the mouth, nose, eyes or throat of another person. This could be due to food being contaminated by a food handler or by a person's hands touching a contaminated surfaces then **touching their face or food**.

- Note that shedding of the virus can occur before symptoms appear, after symptoms stop, and some people show no symptoms at all but can still shed the virus.

Other useful information about viruses to help guideline workplace health and safety:

- Viruses are **microscopic particles** (too small to see). Just because something looks clean doesn't mean there's no virus. Proper cleansing of surfaces and hands is essential, not just removing the visible dirt.
- Virus can **only multiply if they infect someone** so once viruses have been cleaned off or inactivated, they won't grow back. Once outside of a person the COVID-19 virus is largely inactivated within a few hours to a few days – faster at higher temperatures.
- The COVID-19 virus is surrounded by an oily envelope so **water and soap** or **detergents** remove the virus and help inactivate it. The virus can be inactivated using **hand sanitisers** and surfaces can be cleaned with **disinfectants** such as disinfectant wipes or chlorine. The 'coronavirus' is one of the most readily inactivated viruses.

Hand hygiene

- Hand hygiene is one of the most effective ways to minimise disease transmission.
- Keep hands clean by minimising contact with surfaces and not shaking hands.
- Hand washing facilities (warm water and soap) or hand sanitisers (e.g. ≥ 60% alcohol) should be available to all workers at all sites (treatment plants, depots, meeting rooms, canteen facilities, shared spaces and vehicles).
- Frequent hand washing or sanitisation should be practiced by all staff.
- Hand washing or sanitisation should be thorough, covering the whole of the front and back of the hands, between fingers and under nails and should take at least 20 s.
- Post handwashing guidance at handwashing facilities to help guide this activity. Some examples of posters for advice on hand hygiene can be found here:
    - https://www.health.nsw.gov.au/Infectious/diseases/Pages/coronavirus-businesses.aspx
    - https://worksafe.tas.gov.au/__data/assets/pdf_file/0008/562805/COVID-19-Hand-Washing-Procedure.pdf

Shared workspaces (offices, depots, laboratories, treatment plants and worksites).

- Maximise working from home and from office locations with less staff on site.
- Minimise in-person meetings, use telephone or video conferencing where possible.
- Minimise the number of people attending essential meetings (e.g. below 10).
- Consider stretching out working days and using shifts so that less people are on site at one time.
- In workspaces and meetings practice social distancing (> 1.5 m) between people.
- When meeting avoid hugging, shaking hands and kissing when greeting.
- Maximise ventilation of rooms and consider using outdoor areas.
- If practicable, install and maintain air filters in the air circulation systems.
- Minimise touching of shared surfaces (vending machines, taps and handles). However, maintain three points of contact to avoid falls on steps and ladders.
- Prop open doors (when safe to do so) to minimise touching door handles.
- Use, and if not in place install, automatic sensor-operated taps and hand dryers.
- Minimise sharing of equipment (computers, printers, copiers, stationary etc.).
- Sanitise high touch surfaces (handrails, banisters, door handles and benches) daily.
- Minimise transfer by not sneezing or coughing near others and onto surfaces (e.g. use open spaces, tissues or elbows, and don't cough/sneeze into hands).
- At present, the use of masks is not considered necessary if the above precautions are taken. If masks are used, they need to be of suitable quality and properly fitted.
- To help avoid staff infecting one another, if staff have signs and symptoms consistent with COVID-19, or if have been in contact with someone diagnosed with COVID-19,

they should call their GP or 1800 020 080 and shouldn't come to shared workspaces until cleared by a doctor. COVID-19 signs and symptoms include:
  - o a fever (temperature ≥ 37.3°C) (most common and in most cases)
  - o a repeating continuous cough (in most cases)
  - o fatigue/tiredness (often)
  - o shortness of breath/sputum (sometimes)
  - o others, such as sore throat or headaches (occasionally)
- Note that many other illnesses have the same or similar symptoms, and that testing isn't always required, since COVID-19 test kits are allocated on a priority basis to higher risk groups or persons known to have been in contact with confirmed cases.

Shared breakout and dining spaces.

- Minimise shared dining spaces: eat/drink at own desks or at a distance from others.
- Wash kitchenware properly (hot water and detergent or dishwasher on hot setting).
- Clean tables and food preparation surfaces with soap and water, sanitiser or disinfectant kitchen wipes after every use as well as regularly by cleaning staff.
- If food is stored and prepared keep it under cover as far as reasonably practicable.

Shared vehicles, plant and equipment.

- Have disinfectant wipes and sanitisers present in vehicles, plant and equipment.
- Before and after each use, sanitise vehicles, plant and equipment by wiping down contact surfaces (including steering wheels, gear sticks and indicators).
- When travelling on public transport, as far as reasonably practicable, exercise social distancing (≥ 1.5 m separation) from others and maintain good hand hygiene.
- At present, the use of masks is not considered necessary if the above precautions are taken. If masks are used, they need to be of suitable quality and properly fitted.

If sanitising isn't an option.

- Some items, (such as some electronics, standards, reagents, sample bottles and plant and equipment), need to be shared but are too sensitive to be reliably sanitised without damage. For such items wear disposable gloves when handling.
- If handwashing facilities and sanitisers aren't available, wear disposable gloves when handling items that are shared.

Separating critical workers.

- It is important to avoid multiple key staff becoming ill at the same time since this could leave inadequate experience and capacity to undertake essential activities.
- Identify and group critical tasks and the staff and groups of staff that undertake those tasks. Find ways to split up and separate teams into duty and standby/backup teams and isolate each from the other to reduce the risk of all becoming ill.
- Some staff could be tasked to desktop and planning activities or other lower exposure risk field activities to reduce the risk of them becoming ill and off work.
- If there is only one workspace and all workers need to be on duty at some point look at temporal separation – keeping workers on different shifts.

Contingency planning.

- Secure supply chains of items required for ensuring workplace health and safety. This may include tissues, soap, wipes, sanitisers and support staff such as cleaners.
- If setting up mutual support arrangements with other utilities and third parties, or with contractors, there may be a need to train potential backup staff to induct and familiarise them with sites in case they are to be drawn upon at short notice and key staff are unavailable. In doing that training, familiarisation and induction take measures to keep identified groups separated to avoid cross-transmission.

<u>Prioritising activities.</u>

- Arrangements need to be put in place to ensure functional operation of treatment plants and networks. This core activity of physically operating the infrastructure and other operational monitoring and control activities should take precedence over longer term activities if there is not the ability to undertake both.
- For monitoring activities laboratories may have severely restricted resources and sampling may involve travel to communities that may spread the virus. Therefore, all non-urgent monitoring should be postponed where possible. A program of essential analyses should be devised that is composed of only those parameters required to ensure operational functionality. For drinking water, consider operation of the whole system based upon on site (treatment plant) and field testing (networks) for parameters such as chlorine and reduce requirements for lab-based testing. This may require training of more field support staff.

<u>Working with wastewater.</u>

- Tasks that currently require personal protective equipment (PPE), such as working in areas with high risk of sewage aerosol exposure, existing PPE requirements still apply. Additional PPE is not required to manage risks from the COVID-19 virus which is much less transmissible than other viruses already routinely present in sewage. Existing safe work methods for working with sewage still apply unchanged.

<u>Protecting higher risk workers.</u>

- Identify workers at higher risk of serious complications, being those aged 60+ for the general population, 50+ for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples, and with underlying health conditions, such as heart and lung disease, diabetes or weakened immune systems.
- As far as reasonably practicable, prioritise modifying their work patterns to minimise their contact with others whilst helping them deal with isolation.

<u>Working safely from home.</u>

- Home-based working can still be hazardous. Staff should maintain a workplace safety culture even at home and should report concerns, hazards and incidents.
- Consider slips, trips and falls, heavy lifting (e.g. desks), electrical safety and hazardous animals and insects.
- Some home-based workplaces can be subject to odour, noise, pollen, poor lighting, inadequate heating or cooling, or other hazards often not found in major centres.
- Longer term home-based work has implications for workstation ergonomics and psychosocial impacts from isolation.
- A good checklist can be found at: https://www.safework.nsw.gov.au/news/safework-public-notice/coronavirus

<u>Awareness.</u>

- Raising awareness of the information given in this guidance, and the relevant national, state or territory guidance given below, is a useful way of familiarising staff with COVID-19 control practices and answering questions.
- Emails, posters, demonstration videos and webinars can be used to share information with staff on these and other related guidelines and ongoing updates.

<u>Useful links to generic advice on workplace health and safety and COVID-19</u>

Australia:

Safe Work Australia provides general advice on working from a workplace and at home.
- https://www.safeworkaustralia.gov.au/doc/coronavirus-covid-19-advice-employers

The Department of Health provides general advice and regular updates on COVID-19:
- https://www.health.gov.au/news/health-alerts

The Department of Health provides advice for older persons:
- https://www.health.gov.au/sites/default/files/documents/2020/03/coronavirus-covid-19-information-for-older-australians_1.pdf

New Zealand:
- https://www.employment.govt.nz/about/news-and-updates/workplace-response-coronavirus-covid-19/

New South Wales:
- https://www.safework.nsw.gov.au/hazards-a-z/diseases/coronavirus-covid-19-advice-and-guidance-for-nsw-workplaces

Victoria:
- https://www.dhhs.vic.gov.au/coronavirus-covid-19-transmission-reduction-measures

Queensland:
- https://www.forgov.qld.gov.au/flexible-work-and-covid-19-coronavirus

South Australia:

Western Australia:
- https://ww2.health.wa.gov.au/Articles/A_E/Coronavirus

Tasmania:
- https://worksafe.tas.gov.au/topics/Health-and-Safety/safety-alerts/coronavirus

World Health Organization:
- https://www.who.int/emergencies/diseases/novel-coronavirus-2019/technical-guidance/risk-communication-and-community-engagement
- https://www.who.int/docs/default-source/coronaviruse/getting-workplace-ready-for-covid-19.pdf?sfvrsn=359a81e7_6

United States:
- https://www.osha.gov/Publications/OSHA3990.pdf
- https://www.cdc.gov/coronavirus/2019-ncov/prepare/prevention.html?CDC_AA_refVal=https%3A%2F%2Fwww.cdc.gov%2Fcoronavirus%2F2019-ncov%2Fabout%2Fprevention.html

Advice for sewer workers relating to COVID-19

WSAA
- https://www.wsaa.asn.au/publication/covid-19-fact-sheet

Water Research Australia
- https://www.waterra.com.au/_r9550/media/system/attrib/file/2200/WaterRA_FS_Coronavirus_V11.pdf

Water Environment Federation
- https://www.wef.org/news-hub/wef-news/the-water-professionals-guide-to-the-2019-novel-coronavirus/

USEPA

- https://www.epa.gov/coronavirus/coronavirus-and-drinking-water-and-wastewater