

Harmony Alliance Guides:  
Risk Management

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# Pandemic Planning



# Pandemic Planning

Coronaviruses are a large family of viruses that cause respiratory infections, ranging from the common cold to more severe illnesses like severe acute respiratory syndrome (SARS), Middle East Respiratory Syndrome (MERS), and the latest strain, COVID-19.



## Workplace Health and Safety (WHS) Requirements

WHS regulators require employers to:

- **Develop a response plan** to address pandemic-related issues.
- **Review and update exposure and infection control policies**, promoting social distancing, good hand and respiratory hygiene, and increasing the cleaning of shared spaces.
- **Implement safe systems of work** in consultation with workers and Health and Safety Representatives (HSRs), ensuring alignment with health authority advice.
- **Continuously monitor the COVID-19 situation**, relying on credible sources like public health authorities for updates and guidance.

## Purpose of this Guide

This guide aims to:

- Provide a template for staff in not-for-profit (or for-purpose) organisations, grassroots organisations or community service providers to develop a **Pandemic Preparation, Response, and Recovery Plan**.
- Help organisations and community service providers assess their risks and implement actions to reduce the transmission of the disease within their workforce, among customers, and across their supply chains.
- Equip employers to respond effectively to positive COVID-19 cases while maintaining operations during the pandemic.

## Community Services

- Community service providers should adapt this guide to suit the size and culture of their organisations.
- Additionally, it is crucial to consult with program and contract stakeholders to ensure any changes to service delivery requirements are clearly understood and aligned with contractual obligations when preparing and implementing a pandemic plan.

## Preparation

A risk management approach is essential to manage a pandemic in the workplace, ensuring that actions are tailored to the specific needs and circumstances of each organisation.

Given that the onset of a pandemic can occur swiftly, employers should review and update their pandemic plans regularly to address anticipated business risks. The plan should ensure compliance with Work Health and Safety (WHS) requirements and address pandemic-specific actions, including government directives and regulatory guidance.

If your organisation does not have a Pandemic Plan or has not considered a pandemic in the existing Business Continuity Plan (BCP), urgent action is required. Without proper preparation, businesses may struggle to respond effectively, putting employees, contractors, visitors, and others at-risk when confirmed cases are identified.

# Pandemic Planning

## Assigning Responsibilities

For larger organisations, the pandemic plan should designate a dedicated pandemic disease manager (and backup manager) to oversee preparations and implement risk control systems.

Responsibilities might include:

- Facilitating infection control risk assessments with workers.
- Ensuring adequate supplies of personal protective equipment (PPE), tissues, and cleaning products.
- Managing entry protocols and the response when someone becomes ill at work.

Smaller organisations without in-house health and welfare support staff may partner with local health or social service providers in advance or engage a qualified safety professional to assist with planning.

## Communication Strategy

Effective consultation and feedback from workers (or their representatives) is crucial during the infection control risk assessments in the preparation phase. This may be achieved through safety committee meetings or team discussions. Document this process as part of your communication strategy.

Maintaining clear communication throughout the response and recovery phases is critical for sharing accurate, up-to-date information from both internal and external sources. A pre-developed communication plan will help manage information under pressure. Ensure consistency in messaging by having a review process before communicating to stakeholders.

## Key Communication Elements:

### 1. Information and Communication Technology (ICT) Capabilities

- › Confirm and test remote work capabilities, including hardware and software requirements.
- › Ensure ICT systems can handle increased demand, considering bandwidth, cybersecurity, and access permissions.

### 2. Audiences

- › Workers and representatives
- › Management and executive teams
- › Supply chain partners
- › Contractors and temporary staff
- › Customers
- › Union representatives
- › Visitors

### 3. Communication Mechanisms

- › Use communication platforms such as Teams, SharePoint, email, SMS, and social media, ensuring they are suitable for the audience and message.
- › Create channels for workers to ask questions and seek support.
- › Ensure materials are accessible, especially for workers with literacy challenges or those from non-English-speaking backgrounds.

### 4. Messages and Timing

- › **Preparation Phase:** Communicate the infection risk assessment process, personal hygiene practices, and support for workers.
- › **Response Phase:** Share timelines for actions, outline worker responsibilities, and provide information on how customer-facing services may be impacted.
- › **Recovery Phase:** Communicate the steps and timing for returning to normal operations.

# Pandemic Planning

## Risk Assessment

Employers who remain open according to government advice should conduct a risk assessment to:

- Identify workers and activities most at-risk of spreading infections (e.g. face-to-face customer service workers, those in contact with visitors, and workers who have recently been exposed to COVID-19).
- Assess risks associated with the physical workspace layout (e.g. proximity of workstations, shared equipment, and common areas).
- Evaluate infection likelihood and consequences, prioritising control measures to minimise or eliminate risks.

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## Recommended actions may include:

- Implementing rigorous hygiene and cleaning protocols.
- Enforcing social distancing requirements where possible.

Additional industry-specific risk control guidance is available from [SafeWork Australia](#).

## Social Distancing

Social distancing is a key measure to reduce transmission. Workplaces must take steps to maintain social distancing, including:

- Altering workspaces to allow for a minimum of 1.5 metres of distance between individuals.
- Using hazard tape to mark areas where social distancing should be maintained.

## Wearing a Mask

While mask-wearing is not mandatory across Australia, it is required in some areas (such as Victoria) in response to COVID-19 surges. Employers should stay informed of local guidelines on mask mandates.

## Working from Home

Working from home is an effective method of social distancing. Employers should ensure workers have access to the necessary equipment, technology, and support to set up a safe and productive home workspace.

## Illness Notification

Establish a clear process for workers to notify managers if they are unwell and suspect COVID-19 exposure. Ensure all workers are aware of this procedure.

## Isolation Rooms

Designate an isolation room for workers who may need to be separated due to illness. Ensure the room is clearly marked and that all workers are aware of its location and use.

# Pandemic Planning

## Response

### Organisation Actions

1. Implement the control measures identified in the risk assessments and recommended by public health advice. Ensure these actions are added to the organisation's risk register.
2. Identify and consult with at-risk and vulnerable workers to determine suitable actions to reduce their risk of exposure based on the risk assessments.
3. Ensure the workplace is kept hygienic and clean. Allocate additional resources to ensure high-traffic areas like toilets, lunchrooms, locker rooms, lifts, and offices are thoroughly cleaned and disinfected. A cleaning register may help track this—refer to the Cleaning and Disinfection Record for guidance.
4. Provide timely and clear information to workers and others regarding the virus and the steps the business is taking to limit its spread. Ensure workers are aware of their responsibilities under the Response plan.
5. Address workers' concerns about pay, leave, safety, health, and other issues that may arise during infectious disease outbreaks. Provide clear, useful information on these topics.
6. Acknowledge and address the mental health and social impacts of COVID-19 exposure in the workplace or community. Offer support, including counselling through employee assistance programs (where available) or other support services. More resources are available at the Department of Health [Head to Health](#) website.
7. If a confirmed case of COVID-19 is identified at the workplace, take immediate action to isolate the individual and clean the affected areas.
8. Regularly review and update the control measures in place. A good way to do this is through regular testing and evaluation of the intervention measures, such as practicing social distancing and assessing its implementation.

### Worker Actions

- Require workers to stay home if they feel unwell and only return when they are symptom-free.
- Workers who have been notified by the Public Health Unit that they've been exposed to a confirmed case of COVID-19 should inform the workplace and follow all Public Health Unit instructions.
- Workers should maintain a clean workspace, whether in offices or operational areas. Cleaning should be done regularly by the workers during the day, and by cleaners at the end of each shift. Key areas like desks, keyboards, and machinery should be wiped down with general cleaning solutions, disinfectants, or soap and water.
- In workshops or stores, regular cleaning should also be done on equipment like forklifts, machine buttons, and Human Machine Interface (HMI) screens.
- Workers should practice good hand hygiene, including:
  - › Regular handwashing with soap and water, especially before eating and after using the toilet.
  - › Covering sneezes and coughs with their elbow, disposing of tissues properly, and using alcohol-based hand sanitiser when soap and water aren't available.
  - › Avoiding physical contact, such as handshakes, and refraining from touching their face, eyes, or nose.
- Workers must comply with social distancing requirements and public health advice both at work and away from work.
- Workers should cooperate with risk control measures and take all reasonable steps to avoid actions that may increase health risks to themselves or others.

# Pandemic Planning

## Contractor and Visitor Management

- Exclude all non-essential visitors and contractors from the workplace, where possible. Visitors who do need to attend should be informed that failure to comply with on-site risk actions will result in exclusion.
- Consider health screening for visitors and contractors before arrival.
- Implement contact tracing systems, such as QR codes or similar, to capture visitor details.

## Working in Close Contact with Others

In areas where workers need to work in close contact with others, such as on production lines, appropriate PPE may be required. The following PPE may be used where available:

- Safety glasses
- Gloves
- Face masks (N95 or P2)
- Other standard PPE as required for the area of work.

## Actions for Suspected or Confirmed COVID-19 Cases

### • Isolating Workers Due to Suspected COVID-19

If an isolation room is used for suspected COVID-19 cases, it must be thoroughly cleaned and disinfected after use.

### • Confirmed COVID-19 Case Onsite

If a worker is confirmed to have COVID-19 while at work, they must be immediately isolated, and arrangements made for them to return home. If the worker is at home, they should not return to work until they are cleared by their health practitioner or the Public Health Unit.

The workspace of the worker should be cleaned after they leave.

For guidance on actions following a confirmed case, including cleaning requirements, refer to [SafeWork Australia's COVID-19 guidance for workplaces](#).

## • Health Monitoring and Infection Identification

Temperature checks are not always effective in identifying COVID-19 due to the possibility of asymptomatic cases. However, temperature checks can be part of a broader response plan, along with hygiene measures and social distancing practices.

Workers should be encouraged to report any symptoms, including a fever, and be required to stay home if they are unwell.

## Temperature Measurements & Checks

- Workers, contractors, and visitors must undergo temperature checks upon entering the site.
- Those conducting temperature checks must maintain social distancing (1.5 meters), wear appropriate PPE, including a face mask (P2 preferred), gloves, and safety glasses.
- Non-contact infrared thermometers should be used to measure temperatures, typically from the forehead or temple.
- A temperature monitoring log must be maintained, documenting each individual's name, temperature readings, and any follow-up actions.

## Actions for a Positive High-Temperature Result

- If a temperature reading above 38°C is recorded, the worker or visitor should be isolated for five minutes and their temperature retaken.
- If the temperature remains above 38°C, they will be asked to leave the site and contact their GP for further evaluation.
- All relevant details, including temperature readings, must be documented in a temperature monitoring log.
- The worker must inform the workplace of their GP's advice and expected return to work.

If a worker is diagnosed with COVID-19, they must notify the workplace, which will then follow the advice of the Public Health Unit for further action.

# Pandemic Planning

## Recovery

Employers must stay up to date with the latest COVID-19 advice, information, and directives from regulators and health departments, tailored to the specific needs of the workplace and community.

In consultation with workers and/or their Health and Safety Representatives (HSRs), and based on the current public health advice, employers should begin:

- Coordinating the stand down of enhanced safety measures.
- Managing the transition back to normal business operations, ensuring that access to work-based counselling and support services continues (where applicable).

It is essential to keep workers, contractors, customers, and others informed about the evolving risk levels at the workplace and the phased stand-down of control measures. Effective communication strategies should be used to maintain clear and accurate messaging.

Employers should review their pandemic plan in consultation with workers and/or their representatives. The review should assess what worked well and identify areas for improvement. Keep in mind that the impact of the pandemic may vary across Australia, and some businesses may be able to begin their recovery activities sooner than others.

Employers should also consider how the changes made during the response phase might affect business as usual. For example, consider whether increasing access to flexible work arrangements, if successful during the response period, should continue. Evaluate the impact of working with reduced staffing levels on business performance, including production, quality, and costs.

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### Other Harmony Alliance Guides in the Risk Management Series

- Risk Management
- Identifying, Analysing & Evaluating Risk
- Risk and Culture
- Crisis Management
- Emerging Risks
- Business Continuity Planning – Overview

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