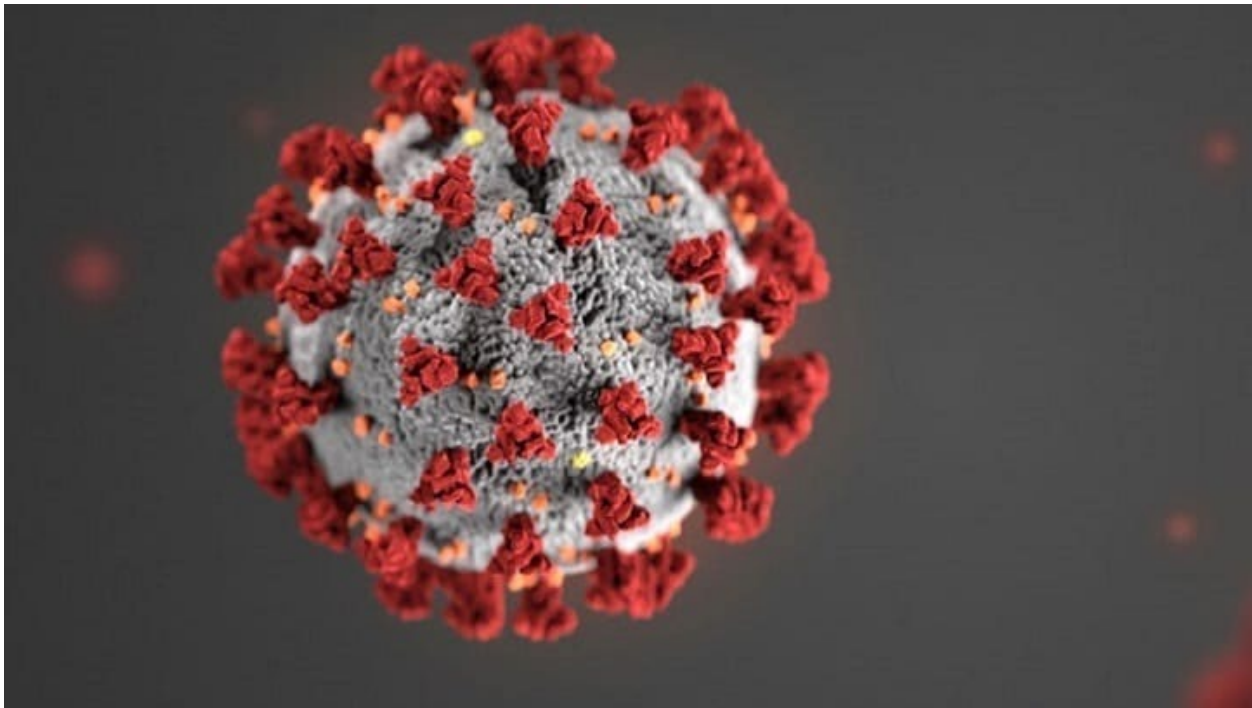


What Employers Can do to Combat Coronavirus in the Workplace

By now, you've undoubtedly heard a copious amount of details about the recent coronavirus outbreak that began in Wuhan City, China. But for all the business owners, C-Suiters, and HR professionals, you need to know what your organization can do to counter this pandemic. So, in this article, we'll tell you what the coronavirus is and what you, the employer, can do to combat this virus in the workplace.

What is the Coronavirus?

There are actually multiple types of human coronaviruses. This strain of the disease has been named coronavirus 2019, by the World Health Organization (WHO), or COVID-19, for short. In COVID-19, 'CO' stands for 'corona,' 'VI' stands for 'virus,' and 'D' for disease. The virus causing COVID-19 isn't the same as the coronaviruses that commonly circulate among humans and cause mild illnesses, such as the common cold.



How Employers Can Combat the Coronavirus 2019

While, as of yet, there's no vaccine for COVID-19, there are several actions your firm can take to ensure the safety of your employees and combat the spread of COVID-19. These actions are as follows:

1. Communication is Key

The first step employers should take is to ensure you're communicating with your employees on a regular basis. Stay in contact and up to date with the latest news and analysis from the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC). One of the most significant practices your business can take to battle COVID-19 is to fight the flow of misinformation that exists in today's world.

So, make sure when communicating with your employees, you're only using quality, trusted sources, such as the CDC. Scaring your employees isn't helpful to either them or you. A critical first step to ensuring proper communication, according to [Employee Benefits Adviser](#), is to establish one individual as the point person for all coronavirus-related news and information. You need to find an individual who is both knowledgeable and has the time and resources to gather the correct information.

2. Promote Precautions

There are several recommended, standard precautions each of your employees should take to help prevent the spread of coronavirus. These precautions include:

- Washing hands with soap and water for at least 20 seconds
- If soap isn't available, use hand sanitizer (at least 60 percent alcohol content)
- Disinfecting touchable objects and surfaces
- Avoiding close contact with people who are sick
- Educating employees about travel advisories before business trips
- Covering your mouth & nose with a tissue when you cough or sneeze
- Staying home when sick

3. Have a Plan in Place

Another step every employer should take to battle the spread of coronavirus, is to establish a plan *right now*. You should have a plan in place that dictates the actions of employees who recently traveled, those who are presenting symptoms, and those who have tested positive for the coronavirus. It's vital for employees who've recently traveled or are showing symptoms that you ask the correct questions.

Federal laws, such as the Americans with Disabilities Act, limit the types of health information employers can seek from their employees. So, the kind of questions you ask is critical. For example, employers can't ask questions that may indicate a person has an underlying health issue, such as "Do you have a compromised immune system?"

Still, during a pandemic, employers can ask whether a worker has flu-like symptoms, according to guidance from the Equal Employment Opportunity Commission. And, if workers are presenting these symptoms, it is permissible to send those employees home.

Similarly, during such a pandemic, it's permissible for employers to fever screen and act against an employee after the return from an affected area. The previously mentioned disability discrimination laws don't apply if the employer acts reasonably to prevent the possibility an employee may become ill and disabled in the future (and infect co-workers).

4. Utilize Your Employee Benefits Plan

Your employee benefits program is an invaluable tool to help your business avoid the spread of coronavirus amongst your staff. For example, benefits such as remote work, flexible work options, alternative work schedules, and flexible leave policies can help employees avoid spreading the virus if they've traveled to an affected area or suspect they are infected.



Similarly, make sure your employees understand your paid leave policy. Paid time off can help employees avoid a loss of pay if they do have to quarantine themselves due to the illness. Or your company could consider continuing regular pay for workers required to stay home for 14 days, rather than making them use their paid time off. Additionally, your health insurance plan is critical to ensuring your employees are receiving treatment as soon as possible.

One man from Miami made national news when he went to get tested for coronavirus and received a surprise \$1,400 medical bill for the test. It turns out the man's employer-provided only a short-term health insurance plan, which usually offers less significant benefits for participants. So, make sure your employees know what your health plan covers and encourage them to see a health provider as soon as possible if coronavirus symptoms present.

*Note: Employees aren't allowed to stay home to avoid getting sick (except those with pre-existing conditions that may worsen).

5. Be Wary of Discrimination

The final step every employer should take in the wake of this potential pandemic is to be cognizant and wary of possible incidents of discrimination. During recent weeks in the U.S., multiple reports of anti-Asian discrimination based on blaming Asians for the outbreak, have surfaced. Your company must take steps to avoid this kind of discrimination in the workplace.

Members of protected classes should not be singled out for elevated scrutiny. If this type of scrutiny occurs, it may constitute illegal discrimination. So, employers need to ensure they're not targeting individuals of Asian descent. Reaffirm and restate your company's anti-discrimination, harassment, bullying, and retaliation policies. Similarly, conduct thorough and prompt investigations if complaints of mistreatment or discrimination do occur.

The Wrap

No matter what your business does to combat the coronavirus, specifically, one of the most necessary actions anyone can take is to **remain calm**. While coronavirus is a severe illness, your business can adopt the five actions above to combat the spread of the virus in the workplace.

And, if you're concerned about your symptoms, please contact your local healthcare provider as soon as possible. If you were in China in the last 14 days, the CDC offers the following guidance:

<https://www.cdc.gov/coronavirus/2019-ncov/about/steps-when-sick.html>