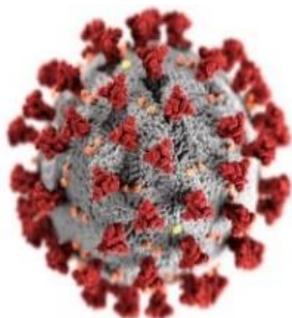# Health and Safety Guide coronavirus/Covid-19
for Officers and Representatives

Rob Miguel, Unite National Health and Safety Advisor

INFORMATION ABOUT THE VIRUS

Coronaviruses are a large family of viruses common across the world that can cause illness such as respiratory tract infections. Typical symptoms of coronavirus include fever and a cough that may progress to a severe pneumonia causing shortness of breath and breathing difficulties. Other examples are Severe Acute Respiratory Syndrome (SARS), and Middle East Respiratory Syndrome (MERS).

Unite has concerns regarding workers' protection against the more transmissible Covid-19 variants that our now circulating in the UK. The risk is compounded by the fact there is now strong evidence that the virus can be transmitted via airborne particles, creating increased risks of infection particularly in indoor workplaces.

There needs to be a step change in current infection prevention and control guidance with particular emphasis around vaccine progression, testing, adequate ventilation, and use of masks and face coverings. A revision of The UK's PPE strategy is required and advice on vulnerable worker and BAEM risk assessments, additional protection measures is needed.

HOW IS THE VIRUS SPREAD?

Respiratory infections can be transmitted by airborne and contact spread. Airborne spread occurs through droplets of different sizes. Larger droplets fall to the ground and on surfaces at around 1 metre, while small droplets ("aerosols") are suspended in the air and can travel several metres. Breathing in these aerosols can result in clinical infection depending on the viral load (amount of virus), especially in poorly ventilated indoor spaces. Outdoors is much safer, but distancing is still important.

Contact spread can occur when people touch each other and then touch their eyes, nose or mouth with their hands which contains virus. Contact spread can also occur by touching contaminated surfaces and then your face. It is not yet clear which route of spread predominates, but the emerging evidence points clearly to the importance of airborne spread and the need for additional controls such as good ventilation in indoor workplaces. For more see this Useful Guide by Doctors in Unite union.

Global Spread

Covid-19 has spread rapidly too many countries around the globe and now requires national and international co-ordinated infection controls. Here is a Google map which is regularly updated of confirmed global cases of coronavirus disease (Covid-19).

Risk Level

The World Health Organisation has defined the Covid-19 outbreak a global pandemic. Refer to alert level overview of the risk level in the UK

UK GOV updates

England step 4 here. Regular updated information for England and all the devolved countries can be found here: https://www.gov.uk/coronavirus

UK Health Authorities Covid-19

Regular updated daily health advice regarding Covid-19 is provided from all the health authorities for England, all the devolved nations and Republic of Ireland below:

- **England**: Public Health England (PHE)
- **Scotland**: NHS Scotland
- **Northern Ireland**: Public Health Agency
- **Wales**: Public Health Wales / Iechyd Cyhoeddus Cymru
- **Republic of Ireland**: Health Service Executive(HSE) / Feidhmeannacht na Seirbhise Slainte

HEALTH AND SAFETY REQUIREMENTS

There is a primary duty under the Health and Safety at Work Act 1974 (HASAWA) together with associated legislation for employers to protect the health, safety and welfare of their workforce and others affected by their operations. The duty applies in common law to take reasonable care for the health and safety of the workforce.

There are general duties to carry out risk assessments in order to control the 'risks' around Covid-19 found in the Management of Health and Safety at Work Regulations 1999.

Specific legislation applying to infectious micro-organisms/biological agents, of which coronavirus is a group, comes under the auspices of the Control of Substances Hazardous to Health Regulations 2002 (COSHH) [PDF].

Access the latest advice from the **HSE** on **specific elements of Covid-19**.

RISK ASSESSMENT

Unite is advocating a risk assessment approach using a hierarchy of control common in good health and safety management, **no work should start without an up to date risk assessment. Consultation with the union and our representatives will be the key to success, set up a Covid-*19 Task Group* made up of trade union reps and management.**

- **Unite Guide Covid-19 Risk Assessment and Procedures here**
- Identifying Infection at work and **controlling the risks in the workplace**
- HSE guide to risk assessment **here**
- Covid-19 Risk assessment **here**

BIOLOGICAL AGENTS SUCH AS CORONAVIRUS

The Advisory Committee on Dangerous Pathogens ACDP has an **approved list of biological agents**. Covid-19 is a new virus, however previous coronaviruses are listed **here.**

Vaccination

At the time of this update, over 128,662 people across the UK have died within 28 days of a positive test for coronavirus (Covid-19). Vaccination is the single most effective way to reduce deaths and severe illness from Covid-19. A national immunisation campaign has been underway since early December 2020. Find here vaccination information updates including: Coronavirus vaccine - weekly summary of Yellow Card reporting - GOV.UK (www.gov.uk).

Data UK government data and insights on Coronavirus (Covid-19).

THE RISKS TO HEALTH

There has now been quite a lot of research undertaken as to the health effects of Covid-19, from acute effects to chronic effects of long Covid, through to mental health. We now know that the severity of the infection increases with age, and is effected by additional health conditions, gender and race. Different types of research can be found here.

The total /daily infection rates and deaths globally and for each country and be accessed on the World Health Organisation's (WHO) Covid-19 dashboard.

WORKERS AT RISK

Depends on the type of work being performed and exposure risk, including potential for interaction with infectious people and contamination of the work environment. Different jobs will carry a higher risk of being exposed to the virus such as front line staff in health, at airports, education, prisons and frequent travellers. The government has issued advice for various sectors including those in the front line. See *sector guidance* on the next page.

SECTOR GUIDANCE

The government has also updated its guidance for businesses on working safely during Coronavirus, this guidance has been produced to help ensure employers, employees and the self-employed understand how to work safely during the coronavirus pandemic *(see also additional links to specific guidance for **Wales, Scotland, Northern Ireland** and the **ROI**)*.

The guides cover a range of different types of work. Many businesses operate more than one type of workplace, such as an office, factory and fleet of vehicles. You may need to use more than one of these guides as you think through what you need to do to keep people safe. Disappointingly there was little consultation with unions from BEIS on the below sector guides, however union input made many improvements to what was originally proposed.

- **Construction and other outdoor work**
  Guidance for people who work in or run outdoor working environments

- **Events and attractions** - Settings related to events and visitor attractions.

- **Hotels and guest accommodation**
  Guidance for people who work in or run hotels or other guest accommodation

- **Offices, factories and labs** Guidance for people
  who work in or run offices, factories, plants, warehouses,
  labs and research facilities and similar indoor environments.

- **Restaurants, pubs, bars, nightclubs and takeaway services** Guidance for
  people who work in or run restaurants, pubs, bars, cafes, nightclubs or takeaways.

HEALTH PROFESSIONALS

Comprehensive government guidance introduced for health professionals. Includes guidance on the assessment and management of suspected UK cases, current information on **investigation and initial clinical management of possible cases** of Covid-19. Also preparing for an assessment of a possible case of Covid-19 and precautionary procedures to be used including appropriate PPE.

Guidance on infection prevention and control for Covid-19

Guidance on infection prevention and control for Covid-19. Sustained community transmission is occurring across the UK. The guidance is issued jointly by the Department of Health and Social Care (DHSC), Public Health Wales (PHW), Public Health Agency (PHA) Northern Ireland, Health Protection Scotland (HPS)/National Services Scotland, Public Health England (PHE) and NHS England for health and care organisations as the UK moves to maintain healthcare services.

TRANSPORT GUIDANCE

TRAVEL TO WORK

Modes of transport include walking, cycling, and travelling in vehicles or on public transport during the coronavirus outbreak, details found in: Safer travel guidance for passengers

Checklist to Travel Safely during the coronavirus outbreak

- Working from home where possible
- Considering all other forms of transport, e. g cycling and walking, before public transport
- Avoid the busiest times and routes
- keep your distance when your travel
- Washing or sanitising your hands regularly
- Do not travel if you have coronavirus symptoms no matter how mild
- Do not travel if advised by the test and trace service that you should self-isolate

TRANSPORT OPERATORS' DUTIES

The guide is intended for transport organisations in England, It outlines measures to assess and address the risks of coronavirus (Covid-19). The guide will give Unite officers and reps a good feel of what is required from transport operators, there is different guidance for Northern Ireland, Scotland and Wales.

Note that transport providers should remain mindful of their obligations under health and safety, equalities and employment legislation. They also should co-ordinate their planning and actions with other providers.

Read the Coronavirus safer transport guidance for operators**.**

INTERNATIONAL TRAVEL AND IMMIGRATION

- Guidance for British citizens travelling abroad

- What you need to do if you're travelling to the UK

- Foreign travel advice for each country

- Safer air travel guidance for passengers

- Get support if you're waiting to return to the UK

- Essential international travel guidance

- Guidance for visa applicants in the UK and abroad

EDUCATION AND CHILDCARE

Guidance for teachers, school leaders, carers, parents and students

England:
- List of critical workers (key workers) and vulnerable children and young people who can access full-time education provision in the case of future restrictions on education during the coronavirus (Covid-19) outbreak. [children of critical workers and vulnerable children](#)
- GCSE, AS and A level exams will not go ahead as planned in 2021
- There's remote teaching at universities except for some courses

Information for the devolved nations:

- [Changes to education in Scotland,](#)
- [Changes to education in Wales,](#) and
- [Changes to education in Northern Ireland](#)

HYGIENE CONTROLS AND PROCEDURES

Hygiene controls are a major factor in controlling infection rates.

This starts with personal hygiene such as washing hands to enhanced cleaning and ensuring appropriate facilities at the workplace.

Unite's [workplace procedural infection controls and facilities **PDF**](#) sets the scene for good practice, summarised below:

- Workplace access
- Travel arrangements
- Enhanced cleaning in the workplace
- Cleaning following a case/possible case of Covid-19 **[here](#)**
- Canteens cafes and eating areas
- Toilet facilities
- Changing facilities, showers and drying rooms
- PPE procedures
- Other measures
- Facilities for isolating in the workplace
- Hand washing facilities

(contd)

Testing for coronavirus (Covid-19)

Get tested for Covid-19

Find out about the different types of Covid-19 test and how to get tested.

Regular rapid lateral flow tests

Find out how to get rapid lateral flow tests for Covid-19 if you do not have symptoms and why twice-weekly testing is important.

How to do a test at home or at a test site

Find out how to do rapid lateral flow tests (tests that give a quick result using a device similar to a pregnancy test) and PCR tests (tests that are sent to a lab)

Test results

Find out how you get your Covid-19 test result, what it means and what you need to do

Antibody testing to check if you've had Covid-19

Details on Find out what a Covid-19 antibody test can tell you and who can get a test

Surge testing

Details from GOV.UK: Surge testing for new Covid-19 variants

Related services

Details from GOV.UK: register a PCR home test kit

Details from GOV.UK: report a COVID-19 rapid lateral flow test result

NHS guidelines for healthcare staff self-testing for coronavirus using a Lateral Flow Device (LFD)

NHS Test and Trace Support

Unite continues to fight for workers to receive full pay from day one. There is government backed financial support administered through local authorities, for details and how to claim go: Claiming financial support under the test and trace support scheme.

Self – Isolation all you need to know

- [When to self-isolate and what to do](#)
- [How long to self-isolate](#)
- [How to avoid spreading coronavirus to people you live with](#)
- [How to treat your symptoms at home](#)
- [Help and financial support while you're self-isolating](#)
- [What to do if your symptoms get worse](#)
- [What to do if you get symptoms again](#)

- **Isolate:** As soon as you experience coronavirus symptoms for 10 days
- All of your household must self-isolate for 10 days from when you started having symptoms
- **Test:** Order a test immediately at www.nhs.uk/coronavirus or call 119
- **Results:** If your test is positive, you must complete the remainder of your 10-days
- Anyone in your household must also complete self-isolation for 10 days
- If your test is negative, you and other household members no longer need to self-isolate
- If positive for coronavirus, the NHS test and trace service will send you a text or email alert, or call you with instructions of how to share details of people with whom you have had close, recent contact and places you have visited.
- Contacted by NHS T&T because you were in close contact with someone who is positive: You will need to self-isolate for 10 days even if you yourself have a test that is negative.

Vaccination Programme

[The Joint Committee on Vaccination and Immunisation (JCVI)](#) advises the Government around the Covid-19 vaccination programme including priority groups. PHASE 1 JCVI advises that the first priorities for the Covid-19 vaccination programme should be the prevention of mortality and the maintenance of the health and social care systems. As the risk of mortality from Covid-19 increases with age, prioritisation is primarily based on age. These groups represent around 99% of preventable mortality from Covid-19.

Priority Groups
1. residents in a care home for older adults and their carers
2. all those 80 years of age and over and frontline health and social care workers
3. all those 75 years of age and over
4. all those 70 years of age and over and clinically extremely vulnerable individuals
5. all those 65 years of age and over
6. all individuals aged 16 years to 64 years with underlying health conditions which put them at higher risk of serious disease and mortality
7. all those 60 years of age and over
8. all those 55 years of age and over
9. all those 50 years of age and over

Most of the above have been offered two vaccinations and the rest of population at least one. Please see latest, updated regularly [Vaccinations in the UK | Coronavirus in the UK (data.gov.uk)](data.gov.uk)

PERSONAL PROTECTIVE EQUIPMENT (PPE)

The global pandemic of Covid-19 has created an incredible demand for PPE, however PPE is now more readily available. The government's [UK strategy and plan for PPE](#) covers both healthcare and non-healthcare settings. Unite feels this strategy produced in April last year needs an urgent review given the emergence of new variants and acceptance of airborne transmission.

Unite wants an independent revision of the PPE Covid-19 strategy for the UK. In both health care and non-health care settings. It has become clear from concerns our members are expressing that health care workers need a higher level of PPE, and PPE needs to be made available to sectors outside those listed in current guidance.

How does it stand at – present:

PPE in health and social care settings

UK professionals working in the health and social care sectors are most at risk, because they are responsible for providing essential treatment and care for those who are either confirmed to have Covid-19, are symptomatic, or are highly vulnerable. They are often in prolonged close contact with individuals who are symptomatic or particularly vulnerable to infection. Please see below latest guides agreed by the four devolved health authorities.

The UK government and devolved administrations published clear guidance on appropriate PPE for health and social care workers. This has been written and reviewed by all four UK public health bodies and informed by NHS infection prevention control experts.

- **[PPE in Health Care](#)**
- **[PPE in Community and Social Care settings](#)**
- **[PPE Aerosol Generating Procedures](#)**
- **[PPE in Non - Aerosol Generating Procedures](#)**

Many trust are moving to supplying their front line staff with FFP2/3 type masks, as opposed to medical masks.

PPE in non-health/social care settings

The UK government and devolved administrations have published guidance for those in non-health care settings on which sectors should be using PPE for Covid-19 as follows:
- **The management and care of deceased**
- **Cleaning in non- health care settings**
- **Prisons and other prescribed places of detention**
- **First responders**

Current guidance for both settings: The [government's PPE Hub](#) and the HSE [Personal Protective Equipment Covid-19](#) guidance.

REPRODUCTION NUMBER (R)

In the COVID crisis one of the most important numbers is R - the reproduction number. If this is below one, then on average each infected person will infect less than one other person. The number of new infections will fall over time, however the lower the number, the faster the number of new infections will fall. When R is above one, the number of new infections is accelerating, the higher the number the faster the virus is spreading.
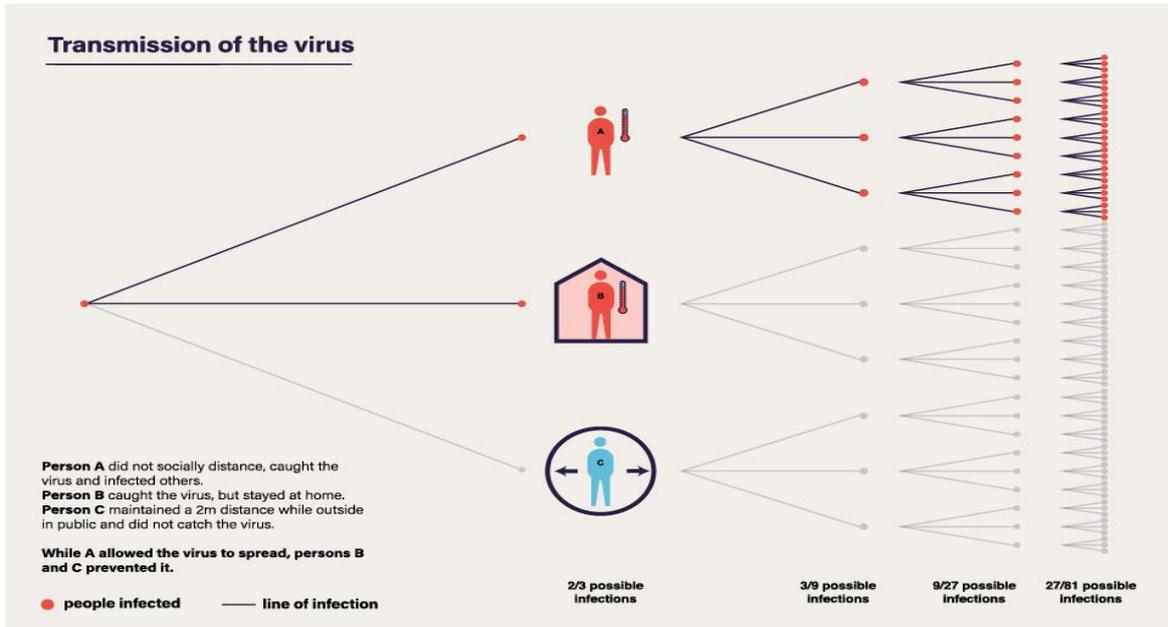
All the controls, procedures and required facilities set out in this guide are needed in order to ensure the R remains below one. This is also important to ensure deaths and infection rates are kept to a minimum, and the allow UK health services to cope with the pandemic.
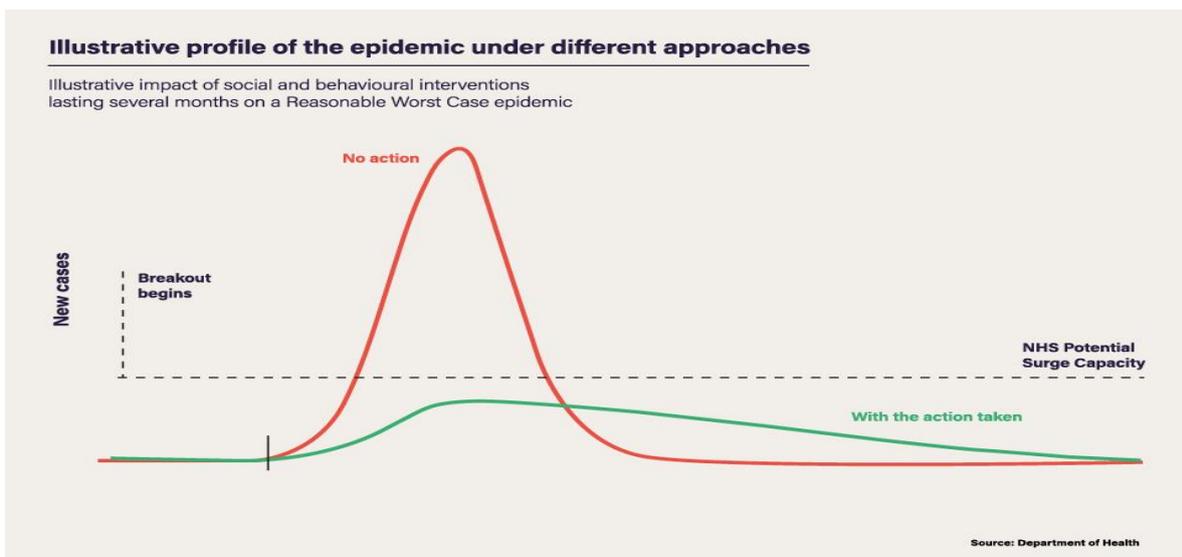
Employers have a legal obligation to ensure controls measure are in place to protect the health of the workforce, see Unite advice on the legal right to have a safe place of work.

HOME WORKING

Employers have the same health and safety responsibilities for home workers as for any other workers.

When someone is working from home temporarily, consider:

- How will you keep in touch with them?
- What work activity will they be doing?
- Can it be done safely?
- Control measures need to be put in place to protect them

LONE WORKING WITHOUT SUPERVISION

There will always be greater risks for lone workers with no direct supervision or anyone to help them if things go wrong.

WORKING WITH DISPLAY SCREEN EQUIPMENT

There is no increased risk from display screen equipment (DSE) for those working at home temporarily. However see the practical workstation checklist that workers can complete.

SPECIALISED DSE EQUIPMENT NEEDS

Employers should try to meet those needs where possible.

STRESS AND MENTAL HEALTH

Home working can cause work-related stress and affect people's mental health. Being away from managers and colleagues could make it difficult to get proper support.

KEEP IN TOUCH

Put procedures in place so you can keep in direct contact with home workers so you can as early as possible. It is also important to have an emergency point of contact and to share this so people know how to get help if they need it.

Full guide **Unite Guide Home Working Covid-19**

New York Times article:
The tech headaches of working from home and how to remedy them
From shoddy Wi-Fi to digital distractions, our tech can make remote work miserable. Here's how to overcome the problems – full article.

See also HSE guidance on home working.

MENTAL HEALTH CONSIDERATIONS DURING COVID-19 OUTBREAK

World Health Organisation: The following principals were developed by the Mental Health Department at WHO as support for mental and psychological wellbeing during Covid-19.

- Covid-19 has and is likely to affect people from many countries, in many geographical locations. Don't attach it to any ethnicity or nationality. Be empathetic to those who got affected, in and from any country, those with the disease have not done anything wrong.

- Don't - refer to people with the disease as "Covid-19 cases", "victims", "Covid-19 families" or the "diseased". They are "people who have Covid-19", "people who are being treated for Covid-19", "people who are recovering from Covid-19" and after recovering from Covid-19 their life will go on with their jobs, families and loved ones.

- Avoid watching, reading or listening to news that cause you to feel anxious or distressed; seek information mainly to take practical steps to prepare your plans and protect yourself and loved ones. Seek information updates at specific times during the day once or twice. The sudden and near-constant stream of news reports about an outbreak can cause anyone to feel worried. Get the facts. Gather information at regular intervals, from the WHO website and local health authorities' platforms, in order to help you distinguish facts from rumours.

- Protect yourself and be supportive to others. Assisting others in their time of need can benefit the person receiving support as well as the helper.

For more information please refer to the Unite Mental Health Guide.

Help with mental health issues during Covid-19 crisis and at any other time can be found on the MIND and NHS web sites, both provide comprehensive advice and specialist signposting:

Working safely during the coronavirus (Covid-19) outbreak

The following is a suite of guidance from HSE that reps will find extremely useful. Unite engages with HSE on various government Industrial Advisory Committees in most sectors, we are therefore very influential in advising HSE on the guidance they produce.

- Risk assessment
- Social distancing
- Cleaning, hygiene and handwashing
- Ventilation and air conditioning
- Talk to workers and provide information
- Working from home
- Vulnerable workers

FURTHER ESSENTIAL READING - COVID Guide: Help for Union Reps