

# FACTSHEET

## Managing COVID-19 health risk – advice for employers and employees



As the COVID-19 pandemic evolves, it is important for everyone to be aware of the current COVID-19 situation in the ACT and to continue to manage their own health risk. In addition, employers need to ensure they have processes in place to manage the workplace safety of any employee who may be at higher risk of severe illness with COVID-19.

The guidance below will assist employers and employees, including volunteer workers, to adopt a risk-based approach when making decisions about the need for altered working arrangements to protect an employee from any risk of contracting COVID-19 in the workplace. This guidance is based on updated advice from the [Australian Health Protection Principal Committee on managing health risk as COVID-19 measures lift](#), which replaces the previous statement on managing vulnerable workers.

# Which factors should guide decisions about the need for altered working arrangements?

In deciding whether there is currently a need for employees to access altered working arrangements such as working from home, being placed on modified duties in the workplace or accessing leave, the following factors should all be considered:

1. The current risk of contracting COVID-19 in the community;
2. Individual risk factors for severe illness with COVID-19; AND
3. The type of work an employee undertakes and the controls or risk minimisation measures that can be put in place to protect the employee.

These are discussed in more detail below.

## 1. Consider the current risk of contracting COVID-19 in the community

To contract COVID-19 you need to have contact with someone who has the disease and can pass the infection on to you. This means that the local pattern of COVID-19 in the ACT community is **the most important** determinant of an employee's risk. If there are no cases or a low number of cases and no evidence of community transmission, then the risk of an employee contracting COVID-19 in the workplace is low regardless of risk factors such as age or health condition and it should be safe for an employee to return to work with appropriate precautions in place.

Employers and employees can stay up to date with the COVID-19 situation in the ACT by regularly visiting this website: <https://www.covid19.act.gov.au/>

## 2. Consider individual risk factors for severe infection with COVID-19

An employee's risk of severe illness with COVID-19 increases with **older age**, presence of **certain health conditions** and/or a weakened immune system. Age is the strongest risk factor associated with severe COVID-19 illness and death.

The **highest risk of severe illness** with COVID-19 occurs in people who:

- › are 70 years of age or older
- › have had an organ transplant and/or are taking medicines that suppress the immune system
- › have had a bone marrow transplant in the last 24 months or are on medicines that suppress the immune system for graft versus host disease
- › have blood cancer e.g. leukaemia, lymphoma or myelodysplastic syndrome (diagnosed within the last 5 years) or
- › are having chemotherapy or radiotherapy

Other chronic health conditions are also associated with a risk of severe COVID-19 illness. For more information on chronic conditions which increase risk of severe illness see advice for people with chronic health conditions from the Australian Government Department of Health.

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Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples may be at increased risk of severe disease and should be considered a priority population when assessing potential risk related to COVID-19.

Employees should be encouraged to talk to their doctor if they are not sure about their individual risk or if they have questions about how they can best manage their health conditions.

**Employees have a right to privacy and should not be expected to disclose their personal medical details to their employer, unless they choose to do so.**

Employers can however request that an employee obtain a medical certificate or letter from their treating doctor to confirm that they meet one or more of the criteria for being at higher risk of severe illness with COVID-19.

### **3. Consider the type of work an employee undertakes and whether adequate controls or risk minimisation measures can be put in place to protect the employee**

Consider whether the type of work an employee does may pose a higher risk of exposure to COVID-19, either through:

- › potential exposure to infected people, such as in health or aged-care settings; and/or
- › working conditions where physical distancing is difficult to maintain (e.g. working in the disability or aged care sector); and/or
- › work with multiple face-to-face interactions with others (e.g. working in retail, hospitality, emergency services or public transport); and/or
- › working in a setting associated with increased transmission of the virus (e.g. meat processing).

Then consider what control measures can be put in place to help protect the employee in the workplace, including:

- › General infection control measures including physical distancing, frequent handwashing or use of hand sanitiser, use of personal protective equipment (PPE) where appropriate.
- › Additional workplace-specific COVID-19 controls that could be implemented to protect the employee.

**It is important to remember that regardless of age or medical conditions, if there are few cases in the community, then the actual risk of contracting COVID-19 is low. It is important to stay up to date.**

Those at higher risk of more severe COVID-19 illness should develop an individual workplace COVID-19 action plan with their employer.

When there is community transmission or increasing COVID-19 cases in the local community, people at increased risk of severe disease may need to apply additional controls to manage their risk at work in accordance with their workplace COVID-19 action plan.



## What is the role of an employee's General Practitioner (GP)?

General Practitioners (GPs) can help their patients understand whether they have specific risk factors for developing severe illness with COVID-19 and can discuss the current COVID-19 situation in the ACT. GPs can assist their patients in developing a personal COVID-19 plan.

However, they cannot be expected to have a full appreciation of risks specific to an employee's workplace, of management discussions that have occurred between the employer and employee or whether adequate risk minimisation measures could be implemented. Because of this, GPs cannot be expected to provide certification that an employee is either safe or unsafe to return to normal or modified duties at their workplace.

GPs can assist by providing important information to employees about their own personal risk, which the employee may wish to discuss with their employer. Employers, ideally in consultation with the employee, should then undertake a risk assessment to decide whether the employee is safe to return to the workplace, and whether risk minimisation measures should be implemented.



## What are my responsibilities as an employee?

All employees have a responsibility to consider their personal or individual risk of developing severe illness with COVID-19 and notify their employer if they may be at higher risk.

All employees who are concerned about their risk of COVID-19 also have a responsibility to work with their employer to develop a workplace COVID-19 action plan.

All employees have a responsibility to notify their employer if they are unwell, stay home from work if they are unwell, and get tested for COVID-19 if they have symptoms including fever, cough, sore throat or shortness of breath. For more information about symptoms of COVID-19 and getting tested: <https://www.covid19.act.gov.au/stay-safe-and-healthy/symptoms-and-getting-tested>

Every person has a responsibility to keep other people in their workplace safe by:

- › practising physical distancing;
- › practising good cough and hand hygiene;
- › considering downloading the COVIDSafe app; and
- › staying up to date on COVID-19.

## What are my responsibilities as an employer?

- › Employers should ensure they stay up to date with the most recent advice on COVID-19 in the ACT.
- › Employers must, in consultation with employees and their representatives, assess the way their work is done in the workplace to identify, understand and quantify COVID-19 risks and to implement and review control measures to address those risks.
- › Workplaces need to develop a COVIDSafe risk mitigation strategy in accordance with the approved code of practice, see [How to manage work health and safety risks \(2018\)](#).
- › This also applies to organisations that employ workers and engage volunteers. These employers should provide the same workplace protections to volunteers as for paid workers.
- › Employers must work with any employee who notifies them that they may be at higher risk of severe illness with COVID-19 to undertake a risk assessment and develop an individual workplace COVID-19 action plan
- › For more information see <https://www.safeworkaustralia.gov.au/covid-19-information-workplaces> and <https://www.covid19.act.gov.au/business-and-work>.

## Where can I get more information?

<https://www.covid19.act.gov.au/becoming-covid-safe>

<https://www.safeworkaustralia.gov.au/covid-19-information-workplaces>

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