

COVID-19 vulnerable employees

Guideline

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Acknowledgements

We acknowledge Metro North Hospital and Health Service's support in the development of this guideline.

Statement

The purpose of this guideline is to support employees and managers to identify and manage vulnerable employees throughout the COVID-19 pandemic.

It is important that line managers are sensitive and empathetic to employees who may have genuine concerns and anxieties about coming to work during the pandemic.

1.1 Outline

This document has been developed to assist employees to identify if they are at higher risk from the effects of the novel coronavirus (COVID-19) due to existing health conditions and/or circumstances.

While defining levels of vulnerability to COVID-19 is difficult given it is such a new illness, this document serves as a broad guide for employees and line managers.

Employees should discuss their situation with their line manager, whether they might be in a vulnerable group with regards to COVID-19 and identify ways they can continue to work with suitable adjustments.

Adjustments to work procedures and the organisation may include, adjusted working hours (e.g. staggered start or finish times), working from an alternative location (e.g. home), redeployment to another role in the organisation and altering the exposure to the clinical environment.

The *Employees in vulnerable groups* form (page 9) should be used to document the disclosure, consideration and approval of the changed working arrangement for vulnerable employees.

Please note this document will be updated as new information comes to light.

1.2 What is COVID-19?

COVID-19 was first identified in December 2019 as a novel (new) coronavirus that causes a respiratory illness. Given it is a new virus, no one is immune and there is currently no vaccine to prevent the viral infection.

There are preventative actions everyone can take to reduce transmission of COVID-19, including:

- observing social distancing requirements
- cleaning hands with soap and water and/or alcohol-based sanitiser, often
- avoiding touching 'high-touch' surfaces in public places (washing hands after touching surfaces in public places)
- avoiding touching the face, nose, eyes, mouth etc.
- wearing personal protective equipment (PPE) as required, as per appropriate protocols.

The Australian Immunisation Handbook also recommends immunosuppressed people undertake seasonal influenza vaccination due to susceptibility to contracting illnesses.

1.3 Who is a vulnerable person¹?

It is possible that employees are at increased risk from the effects of COVID-19 if they:

- are 70 years and older
- are 65 years and older with chronic medical conditions
- are an Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander person who is 50 years and older with one or more chronic medical conditions
- are significantly immunocompromised or taking immunosuppression therapy
- have a medical condition and their doctor has advised in writing (provided a medical certificate) that they are at an increased risk and require work adjustment.

There is limited evidence at this time regarding the risk in pregnant women. More information is provided in section 1.9.

Most employees in the vulnerable category should avoid contact with suspected, probable or confirmed COVID-19 patients.

¹ The categories of people at who are, or are likely to be, at higher risk of serious illness if they are infected with COVID-19 are from the Australian Health Protection Principal Committee recommendations for managing vulnerable workers dated 30 March 2020 and may change from time to time or be refined as more evidence emerges. <https://www.health.gov.au/news/australian-health-protection-principal-committee-ahppc-advice-to-national-cabinet-on-30-march-2020>

1.4 What chronic medical conditions, immune system conditions or medical treatments that put a person at greater risk²?

These conditions increase your risk if you are aged over 65, or if you are an Aboriginal or Torres Strait Islander person aged over 50:

- chronic renal failure
- coronary heart disease or congestive heart failure
- chronic lung disease such as severe asthma, cystic fibrosis, bronchiectasis, suppurative lung disease, chronic obstructive pulmonary disease or chronic emphysema
- poorly controlled diabetes
- poorly controlled hypertension.

You are at increased risk at any age if your immune system is significantly weakened:

- post-transplant, if you have had a solid organ transplant and are on immunosuppressive therapy
- post-transplant, if you have had a haematopoietic stem cell transplant in the last 24 months or are on treatment for graft versus host disease (GVHD)
- by primary or acquired immunodeficiency including HIV infection
- by having chemotherapy or radiotherapy.

You are also at increased risk if you take any biological disease-modifying anti-rheumatic drug (bDMARD) or any of the following immunosuppressive drugs:

- azathioprine, more than 3 mg per kg per day
- 6-mercaptopurine, more than 1.5 mg per kg per day
- methotrexate, more than 0.4 mg per kg per week
- high-dose corticosteroids (20 mg or more of prednisone per day or equivalent) for 14 days or more
- tacrolimus
- cyclosporine
- cyclophosphamide
- mycophenolate
- any combination of these or other DMARD.

² The list of chronic conditions may change from time to time or be refined as more evidence emerges. The most current list can be accessed on the Australian Department of Health website <https://www.health.gov.au/news/health-alerts/novel-coronavirus-2019-ncov-health-alert/advice-for-people-at-risk-of-coronavirus-covid-19>

1.5 What should an employee do if they are a vulnerable person?

If an employee meets the definition of a vulnerable person, they are required to inform their line manager. The employee should also complete the *Employees in vulnerable groups* form (page 9) and provide this to their line manager.

Employees who, in their personal capacity, live with or care for a vulnerable person, should also talk to their line manager if they are concerned that their works put them at risk of contracting COVID-19. See section 1.8 for more information.

Employees who do not meet the definition of a vulnerable person but have concerns about their current work due to their age, a pre-existing medical condition or other personal circumstances, can also talk to their line manager. For more information see section 1.8.

1.6 Actions if an employee is a vulnerable person

Vulnerable employees should advise their line manager that they are a vulnerable person, complete the *Employees in vulnerable groups* form (page 9) and provide this form to their line manager.

The line manager must work with the employee to assess any risks to the employee and develop actions to address those risks. The *Employees in vulnerable groups* form (page 9) provides the minimum risk assessment that should be undertaken.

Where possible, the line manager will seek to implement temporary, short-term and reasonable adjustments such as removing the employee from high-risk work areas,

redeploying an employee to undertake alternative duties, or supporting the employee to work from an alternative location or work from home (where this is an option).

A line manager may decide that further information is needed from the employee in order to manage potential risks. For example, where the employee has identified they have a chronic disease, the line manager could ask the employee to provide information from their doctor confirming they have the condition.

However, the information must only be requested for the purpose of enabling the line manager to assess the risk to the employee and/or make adjustments to the employee's duties to manage the risk.

If an employee advises they belong to a vulnerable group but wants to continue working in their current role – which potentially increases their risk of contracting COVID-19 – a risk assessment should be undertaken to identify the level of risk. Where the risk cannot be removed or reduced, it is recommended that the employee be directed to perform lower risk alternative duties.

1.7 Employees who live with, or care for, a vulnerable person

Employees who live with, or care for, a vulnerable person and are concerned their work places them at increased risk of contracting COVID-19, should talk to their manager about alternative work options that minimise their risk.

Where possible, the line manager will seek to implement temporary, short-term and reasonable adjustments such as removing the employee from high-risk work areas, redeploying an employee to undertake alternative duties, or supporting the employee to work from an alternative location or work from home (where this is an option).

Where alternative work arrangements are not possible, the employee may consider available leave arrangements.

If an employee (in their personal capacity) is caring for a person with COVID-19, they may be able to use their sick or carer's leave. If they exhaust this leave, they should talk to their manager about requesting paid special pandemic leave. An employee may be asked to provide evidence to support their application for sick, carer's or paid special pandemic leave (e.g. a medical certificate confirming the employee needs to be absent as a result of their caring responsibilities). Specific medical information about the other person cannot be requested.

1.8 Employees who don't meet the definition of a vulnerable person but are concerned about working in their current role

An employee may not meet the definition of a vulnerable person but have concerns about their current work due to their age, a pre-existing medical condition or other personal circumstances.

These employees are encouraged to speak to their line manager about their concerns.

Where possible, the line manager will seek to implement temporary, short-term and reasonable adjustments such as removing the employee from high-risk work areas, redeploying an employee to undertake alternative duties, or supporting the employee to work from an alternative location or work from home (where this is an option).

Where alternative work arrangements are not possible, the employee may consider available leave arrangements.

1.9 What should pregnant employees do?

A pregnant employee should discuss their work situation with their line manager.

The Royal Australian and New Zealand College of Obstetricians and Gynaecologists (RANZCOG) recommends that, where possible, pregnant healthcare workers be allocated to patients and duties that have reduced exposure to patients with, or suspected to have, COVID-19 infection.

All employees should observe strict hygiene protocols and have full access to PPE.

Line managers should consider reallocating pregnant employees to lower-risk duties or supporting working from home, where this is possible.

Refer to the *COVID-19 and pregnant staff guideline* on QHEPS, which clearly identifies all requirements.

1.10 Requests to work from home

Queensland Health supports work from home when it is appropriate and approved.

Requests to work from home should be prioritised to:

1. support employees who are fit to work but required, by law, to self-quarantine (e.g. as a result of travel in the past 14 days or close contact of a positive case)
2. support employees who are fit to work but are vulnerable employees, and no suitable alternative arrangements can be identified
3. provide a safe environment for employees and to reduce the spread of COVID-19.

1.11 Use of information

The information an employee is requested to provide will be used only during the response to COVID-19 and only to manage employee safety and wellbeing in accordance with work health and safety obligations.

Providing personal information to mitigate risks to an employee's health and safety at work, and the health and safety of others (such as co-workers and patients), ensures everybody can achieve the goal of maintaining a safe work environment for all.

1. Process

Employee advises their line manager that they have assessed themselves to be a vulnerable person.

Employee and manager discuss strategies to ensure employee's safety and wellbeing.

Employee and line manager complete the *Employees in vulnerable groups* form, including the risk assessment and information on the strategies to be implemented to remove or minimise the risk.

Line manager monitors the arrangement to ensure ongoing employee safety and wellbeing and ensure arrangements are suitable.

Line manager communicates regularly with the employee and, if the agreement is to extend past the interim period, arranges for a further agreement to reflect the ongoing arrangement.

Version control

Version	Date	Comments
1.0	Date	New document
2.0	30/3/2020	Edits by BPIB comms
2.1	30/3/2020	Amendments made by CHRO
2.2	21/04/2020	Amendments made by CHRO

Employees in vulnerable groups form

Queensland Health requires the following information from employees who identify as belonging to a vulnerable group; live with or care for a vulnerable person; or have concerns about continuing to work in their current role. This information will be used only during the response to COVID-19 to allow Queensland Health to manage work health and safety obligations and remove or reduce risks.

Queensland Health may act to ensure the safety and wellbeing of employees, which could include, but is not limited to, moving an employee from high-risk work areas, redeploying an employee to undertake alternative duties, supporting an employee to work from an alternative location or work from home, or require an employee to stay away from the workplace.

Employee name			
Position			
Payroll number		Org unit ID	
Manager name			
Manager's position			
I am a vulnerable person			
Vulnerable group	<input type="checkbox"/>	age 70 or older	
	<input type="checkbox"/>	age 65 or older with a chronic condition <small>(Please also complete the chronic condition section below)</small>	
	<input type="checkbox"/>	Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people 50 years and older with one or more chronic medical conditions <small>(Please also complete the chronic condition section below)</small>	
	<input type="checkbox"/>	immune system condition	
	<input type="checkbox"/>	medical treatment <small>(Biological disease-modifying anti-rheumatic drug (bDMARD) or the listed immunosuppressive drugs)</small>	
	<input type="checkbox"/>	pregnant	
	<input type="checkbox"/>	have a medical condition and their doctor has advised in writing that they are at an increased risk and require work adjustment <small>(A medical certificate is adequate written advice)</small>	
Chronic condition	<input type="checkbox"/>	chronic renal failure	
	<input type="checkbox"/>	coronary heart disease or congestive heart failure	
	<input type="checkbox"/>	chronic lung disease <small>(Severe asthma, cystic fibrosis, bronchiectasis, suppurative lung disease, chronic obstructive pulmonary disease, chronic emphysema)</small>	
	<input type="checkbox"/>	poorly controlled diabetes	
	<input type="checkbox"/>	poorly controlled hypertension	

I am not a vulnerable person	
<input type="checkbox"/>	I live with or care for a vulnerable person
<input type="checkbox"/>	I have concerns about working in my current role because of my age, a pre-existing medical condition or other personal circumstances
Discussion with employee	
Risk assessment	<p>In determining the employee's capacity to perform their duties during the current COVID-19 pandemic a risk assessment should include a consideration of the following factors:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • the high risk factor/s the employee identified • the employee's duties and whether these duties place them at increased risk of infection with COVID-19 • whether the employee can use any PPE to reduce the risk of infection with COVID-19 • whether the way the employee performs their duties can be adjusted to reduce the risk of infection with COVID-19 • whether there are alternative duties the employee can perform to reduce their risk of infection. <p>A further risk assessment of any alternative duties or work location should be undertaken to assess the risk.</p>
Record of employee and line manager discussion	
Agreed mitigation strategies	
Review date	
Signatures	Employee Date
	Manager Date