

The COVID-19 epidemic:

Guide to the use of home offices as a means of reducing COVID-19 infection and advice regarding workplace organisation

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Contents

- Background.....3
- Background..... 3
 - About the virus, disease and outbreak 3
- Home offices as a means of reducing COVID-19 infection..... 4
- Infection prevention measures at workplaces..... 6
 - Sick people should stay at home 6
 - People who can be physically present 6
 - People who cannot be physically present..... 7
 - In case of illness while people are present at the workplace 7
 - If a member of an employee's household is sick 7
 - If a member of an employee's household has confirmed COVID-19 7
 - Good hand and cough hygiene, and more thorough cleaning..... 7
- Contact reduction measures 8
 - Contact reduction measures at the workplace 8
 - Travel to and from the workplace 8
 - Continuity planning 9
- Appendix..... 10
 - Checklist for the use of home offices 10

Background

This guide provides advice concerning when the use of home offices should be considered in order to reduce COVID-19 infection. The guide also gives recommendations on how workplaces should be organised in order to reduce the risk of infection. The guide has been prepared by the Norwegian Institute of Public Health and published by the Directorate of Health, on behalf of the Ministry of Health and Care Services.

The guide is intended for businesses in the public and private sectors. The guide is a supplement to the regulations that apply to the businesses concerned, including the Working Environment Act, and other guidelines and rules that apply to special activities in connection with COVID-19. The guide is based on the infection situation in Norway as of 15 May 2020. The advice in the guide may be updated in the event of changes in the infection situation or if new information becomes available. A separate guide has been prepared for businesses with one-to-one contact¹.

About the virus, disease and outbreak

See <https://www.fhi.no/nettpub/coronavirus/> for updated and supplementary information concerning this.

¹ <https://www.helsedirektoratet.no/veiledere/smittevernfaglig-forsvarlig-drift-i-virksomheter-med-en-til-en-kontakt-som-frisorer-kroppspoleie-mv-covid-19>

Home offices as a means of reducing COVID-19 infection

Home offices are an important tool for reducing contact between people both at the workplace and when travelling to and from work using public transport. The use of home offices will be appropriate as an infection prevention measure if:

- The infection rate is high in the local community or the workplace
- The recommended safe distance between people commuting on public transport to and from work cannot be maintained
- The recommended safe distance between people at the workplace cannot be maintained
- Other infection prevention measures render it necessary (e.g. in connection with the use of home schooling)
- It is necessary in order to ensure continuity for the business in a situation where there is a risk of high levels of absence

The use of home offices to reduce COVID-19 infection must be considered by the health authorities and enterprises. A checklist has been prepared with points for consideration. See the attachment: Checklist for use of home offices.

The Norwegian Institute of Public Health monitors the spreading of COVID-19 infection in Norway and provides advice concerning infection control measures¹. The Directorate of Health and local health authorities can issue recommendations concerning the use of home offices as an infection control measure². The use of home offices to maintain safe distances between people on public transport is particularly relevant for workplaces where many employees use public transport to travel to and from work. This is especially true in and around major cities, such as the Oslo region, where there is considerable pressure on public transport and the use of home offices is recommended for workplaces wherever possible.

The health authorities' advice concerning the use of home offices may vary depending on the infection situation locally, regionally and nationally. Both employers and employees must therefore be prepared for this advice to change, and the workplace should have good procedures in place for dealing with an increasing proportion of the workforce having to use home offices for shorter or longer periods of time.

Businesses must consider whether home offices should be used in addition to other infection prevention measures at the workplace. See the attachment: Checklist for the use of home offices

The use of home offices will also be relevant for people who are at greater risk of developing serious symptoms of COVID-19 where other adaptations to the work are not possible or appropriate. These assessments should be carried out on an individual basis based on the National Institute of Public Health's advice to people in risk groups³.

Home offices should only be used where the business is able to continue to provide a high-quality service using digital solutions. For many services, such as those concerning mental health, vulnerable users, foreign language speakers, children and young people, the building of relationships and the provision of reassurance are vital aspects of the service which cannot normally be replaced by digital services. It is particularly important to consider whether an equivalent level of quality is achieved

¹ <https://www.fhi.no/sv/smittsomme-sykdommer/corona/dags--og-ukerapporter/dags--og-ukerapporter-om-koronavirus/>

² <https://www.helsedirektoratet.no/veiledere/koronavirus/naeringsliv-arbeidsliv-og-arbeidsmiljo>

³ <https://www.fhi.no/nettpub/coronavirus/fakta/risikogrupper/?term=&h=1>

with digital solutions and whether the service is as accessible to everyone and perceived to be as good.

The Norwegian Labour Inspection Authority has its own tools for carrying out risk assessments at workplaces¹. The Norwegian Labour Inspection Authority has also prepared advice for people returning to office jobs² and concerning employer's liability in connection with the mandatory use of home offices³.

See also the attachment 'Checklist for use of home offices'.

¹ <https://www.arbeidstilsynet.no/hms/risikovurdering/>

² <https://www.arbeidstilsynet.no/tema/utforming-av-arbeidsplassen/rad-ved-tilbakeforing-til-arbeid-for-kontorarbeidsplasser/>

³ <https://www.arbeidstilsynet.no/nyheter/korona-palagt-hjemmekontor-hva-ma-arbeidsgiver-gjore/>

Infection prevention measures at workplaces

Many measures have been implemented throughout society which are collectively helping to limit the spread of infection. It is important to use measures which are appropriate for the situation concerned. *The aim of the advice is to reduce the risk of people becoming infected with COVID-19.* The three cornerstones for slowing the spread of infection are:

1. Sick people should stay at home
2. Good hand and cough hygiene, and more thorough cleaning
3. Contact reduction measures

The most important infection control measure is that sick people stay at home. This applies regardless of the type of disease and even in the case of mild symptoms. Correct cough hygiene and social distancing are key to limiting droplet infection, while correct hand hygiene, and especially avoiding touching one's face with unclean hands, is important to prevent indirect contact infection. More thorough cleaning should be considered, particularly for contact points which are touched frequently. Increased physical distance between people reduces the possibility of infection, even before any symptoms develop.

Even if these measures are followed closely, cases of COVID-19 and other infections can still occur. However, implementing the infection control measures suggested here will limit the spread of infection. The measures outlined below set out infection control measures which can help reduce infection risk to a minimum.

Sick people should stay at home

It is important that even those with mild respiratory symptoms do not physically go to work or end up in other situations where they meet other people.

Symptoms of COVID-19 can be mild and difficult to distinguish from other respiratory infections. The most frequently described early symptoms of COVID-19 are a sore throat, cold and mild cough, as well as general malaise, headache and muscle pain. Abdominal pain and diarrhoea may also occur. Approximately 8 out of 10 adult adults only experience mild symptoms. In children, this proportion is probably even higher.

In some people with COVID-19 disease, symptoms can develop further within a few days to a week into a cough, fever and shortness of breath, and some people experience severe symptoms and require treatment in hospital. Severe COVID-19 disease is very rare in children.

In the event of probable or confirmed cases of COVID-19, specific recommendations apply concerning isolation for the sick and quarantine for close contacts¹. The municipal health service is responsible for monitoring COVID-19 cases and for deciding on the necessary measures. The municipal health service defines who is a close contact to the sick person and who should therefore go into quarantine (infection tracking), and whether other people need to be informed. If further measures are needed, the municipal health service is responsible for assessing and, where necessary, implementing such measures.

People who can be physically present

- People who are symptom-free

¹ <https://www.fhi.no/nettpub/coronavirus/fakta/avstand-karantene-og-isolering/?term=&h=1>

- Employees, users and others who have previously had a respiratory infection, provided they have been symptom-free for at least 24 hours
- In the case of previous COVID-19 infections, specific advice applies regarding the isolation period, issued by the health service and www.fhi.no

People who cannot be physically present

- People with symptoms of respiratory infection, even if the symptoms are mild.
- People who are in quarantine or isolation. It is important that the service communicates this to employees, users and others.
- Specific advice has been issued regarding exemptions from quarantine¹ based on the exemption provision in the COVID-19 Regulation².

In case of illness while people are present at the workplace

Employees who fall ill while at the workplace must go home as soon as possible. Sick people who have to be collected by someone else must wait in a separate room or outside where there are no other people around. Sick people should not travel by public transport. Sick people should cover their mouth and nose if they are unable to keep two metres away from other people in order to reduce the spread of infection. After the person has left, the room, toilet and other areas where the sick person has been must be cleaned. Normal cleaning methods and products may be used.

If a member of an employee's household is sick

If a household member has symptoms of respiratory infection but has not been confirmed as having COVID-19, the employee may report for work in the normal way. However, the employee should go home if he or she has symptoms of COVID-19.

If a member of an employee's household has confirmed COVID-19

If someone in the household has been confirmed as having COVID-19, close contacts must be kept in quarantine in accordance with the advice issued by the health authorities.

Good hand and cough hygiene, and more thorough cleaning

Good cough and hand hygiene reduce the risk of all respiratory infections, including infection with novel coronavirus. It is important that the management at the workplace ensures that employees are familiar with the measures below and have received adequate training. Information posters should be put up in appropriate places, such as entrances, communal rooms, kitchens and toilets, in order to raise awareness of infection control advice.

Handwashing with soap and water is recommended after coughing/sneezing, after visits to the toilet, before cooking food, before and after eating meals, after contact with animals, and otherwise when your hands are visibly dirty. Alcohol-based disinfectants/hand sanitisers are effective against coronaviruses and are an option if no hand washing facilities are available. Note that alcohol-based disinfectants are not effective on visibly dirty or wet hands. Hand washing should be carried out first in such cases.

Handwashing or hand disinfection facilities should be available in public areas, such as entrances, canteens and food outlets.

¹ <https://www.fhi.no/nettpub/coronavirus/rad-og-informasjon-til-andre-sektorer-og-yrkesgrupper/rad-til-arbeidsplasser/?term=&h=1>

² <https://lovdata.no/dokument/SF/forskrift/2020-03-27-470>

Avoid touching your face or eyes. It is recommended that wipes/paper towels and handwashing/hand disinfection facilities are readily available for use by employees who are coughing or sneezing. If this is not possible, employees should cough into their elbow.

Toilets and washbasins, handles and other items that are touched frequently should be cleaned often. Ethanol-based disinfection can be used on otherwise clean surfaces (such as handles, keyboards, phones, etc.); otherwise thorough cleaning with ordinary detergents or household chlorine is recommended.

See also the Norwegian Institute of Public Health's advice concerning cleaning and disinfection (<https://www.fhi.no/nettpub/coronavirus/rad-og-informasjon-til-andre-sektorer-og-yrkesgrupper/rengjoring-og-desinfeksjon-ved-covid-19-til-sektorer-utenfor-helsetjenesten/>)

Consideration should be given to using fixed workplaces wherever possible, and also cleaning workplaces thoroughly. When sharing a workplace, work surfaces should be cleaned between each user.

Contact reduction measures

Contact reduction measures at the workplace

Contact reduction measures to prevent the spread of infection are important in all situations and must be followed at every stage of meetings between employees, and between employees and customers/users/clients. A distance of at least one metre should be maintained between people throughout the working day. This also applies to co-working. Businesses must consider how many people may be present at any one time depending on the amount of space that is available.

The distance must be maintained at workstations and during meetings, around entrances, lifts, etc. where congestion can occur.

For many businesses, a partial home office solution, where employees work from their home office on one or more days per week, can be a good tool for reducing the number of people who are at work at the same time. To reduce contact between people who are working/present at the same time, flexible working hours should be arranged, and the same people should work/be present in teams/on the same shift wherever possible.

Examples of measures to maintain social distancing between people include removing chairs from meeting rooms and canteen/dining areas, using every other workplace in open-plan offices where the distance between people is less than one metre and in other small office workplaces. The use of digital meetings should be considered as an alternative to physical meetings if it is not possible to maintain a safe distance before, during and after a meeting.

For physical meetings, the recommendations concerning group size¹ and the provisions of the COVID-19 Regulation concerning events² also apply.

Travel to and from the workplace

The recommended distance of at least one meter should be maintained when travelling to and from the workplace. The use of home offices and flexible working hours are important measures to reduce

¹ <https://www.helsedirektoratet.no/veiledere/koronavirus/gruppestorrelse-og-avstand>

² <https://www.helsedirektoratet.no/veiledere/koronavirus/idrett-kultur-fornoyelsesparker-og-frivillige-organisasjoner/forbud-mot-enkelte-kultur-og-idrettsarrangementer>

contact frequency amongst the population and the use of public transport to and from the workplace, and will be appropriate where passenger capacity on public transport is limited. The introduction of necessary infection protection measures, such as fewer people being able to travel at the same time, will limit the capacity of public transport, particularly in and around large towns and cities.

If it is difficult to maintain the recommended distance on public transport when travelling to work, businesses should consider other measures to avoid employees travelling by public transport. This could involve provision for the use of other means of travel, such as bikes/electric bikes or the provision of parking spaces.

Continuity planning

Home offices can also be used as a tool in a business's continuity planning. Workplaces must prepare for employees to be away from work for a protracted period of time if they are suspected or confirmed as being infected, or if they go into quarantine for 10 days after close contact with someone who is infected. If an employee is confirmed as having COVID-19, many employees may be defined as close contacts and therefore have to go into quarantine. Businesses that rely on continuity in the operation of critical functions may consider using fixed work teams or groups of employees in order to avoid all employees within a function being exposed to infection at the same time.

Guide to continuity planning – Norwegian Directorate for Civil Protection

(<https://www.dsb.no/veiledere-handboker-og-informasjonsmaterieell/veileder-i-kontiunitetsplanlegging---oppretholdelse-av-kritiske-funksjoner-ved-hoyt-personellfravar/>)

Appendix

Checklist for the use of home offices

National/local situation	Considerations
National and/or local infection rate	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - National infection situation - Local infection situation (local and national health authorities)
Public transport situation	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Need for contact reduction measures in the community to avoid congestion in public places and on public transport (local and national health authorities)
Local situation	
Can the work be carried out from a home office?	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Home offices should only be used where a business is able to continue to provide a high-quality service using digital solutions
Employees in risk groups	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - The use of home offices should be considered for people at increased risk of developing serious symptoms of COVID-19 if other work arrangements are not possible or appropriate
Employees with mild symptoms of respiratory disease or who are in quarantine	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Where possible, a home office solution should be established for employees who have to stay at home, but are able to work
Consider whether people can maintain the recommended safe distance when travelling to and from their workplace (business)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Evaluate the need for employees to travel by public transport - Consider whether the employer can offer alternatives (bicycles, more parking spaces, etc.) - The use of home offices to maintain safe distances between people on public transport is particularly relevant for workplaces where many employees use public transport to travel to and from work
Can people maintain the recommended safe distance throughout the working day at their workplace (business)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Systematically assess all areas of the workplace - Focus areas: workplace/offices/open-plan offices, entrances, lifts, meeting rooms, canteens, changing rooms etc.
Meetings	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Digital meetings are recommended if the nature of the work permits such meetings to be used - If physical meetings are necessary, suitable premises must be obtained in order to maintain social distancing, and applicable guidelines for group sizes and events must be followed
Continuity planning	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Businesses that rely on continuity in the operation of critical functions may consider using fixed work teams or groups of employees in order to avoid all employees within a function being exposed to

	<p>infection at the same time</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Employees can be divided into teams which alternate between home offices and physical attendance at the workplace
Homeworking in general	<p>For many businesses, a partial home office solution, where employees work from their home office on one or more days per week, can be a good tool for reducing the number of people who are at work at the same time. Aspects to consider are:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Tasks that employees need to be physically present at the workplace in order to perform - Ergonomic and social considerations, travel route, etc. - Ensuring a minimum physical connection to your workplace - Holding of meetings/discussions which are difficult to hold using digital means
Travel	<p>Digital meetings are recommended in preference to travel if the nature of the work permits such meetings to be used</p>