

COVID-19: How to avoid workplace infections

2021 seems to have jumped in exactly where 2020 left off, with drastically increased COVID-19 infections that will affect workplaces.

Given that many workplaces were shut down over Christmas and New Year, it is valuable to review the health and safety measures to prevent COVID-19, with employees at the start of the year. To recap, these are the most basic steps that businesses need to take to ensure compliance with the OHS regulations as well as ensure healthy workplaces (which is the point of the regulations):

1. Perform a proper risk assessment in the workplace. This will differ in intensity depending on the kind of business, but it's a crucial step that should be taken.
2. Evaluate the workplace and encourage employees who can work from home, to do so. This ensures fewer employees in the workplace and increases appropriate distancing.
3. Supply employees with at least 2 cloth masks. Mask-wearing is now legislated, therefore workplaces should have rules governing the wearing of masks in workplaces and attaching disciplinary consequences if masks are not worn.
4. Hand washing is crucial and should be encouraged. Ensure that employees have access to clean water to wash their hands regularly as well as hand sanitiser with at least 70% alcohol content.
5. Clean surfaces regularly and ensure that cleaning staff are sufficiently protected. They will be working with strong cleaning chemicals daily and cleaning surfaces, assess the risk that they are under and mitigate that appropriately for the workplace.
6. Keep employees at least 1.5m apart, or ensure physical barriers between employees if this cannot be done.
7. Screen employees for symptoms every day. If an employee has symptoms, these should be reported to the National Institute of Occupational Health (NIOH) if there are

more than 50 employees in the workplace. The link to do so is: <https://www.nioh.ac.za/covid-19/occupational-health-surveillance-system-ohss-business-portal/>

8. Educate employees. Make use of the wealth of free resources available, such as the various NIOH posters that can be found here: <https://www.nioh.ac.za/covid-19/>

Vigilance remains key in the fight against this virus, and healthy employees ensure a healthy and productive workplace.