

COVID 19: Guidelines and Recommendations for Safeguarding staff on Horticulture facilities

Introduction

This document is prepared to inform horticulture producers on how to mitigate for an outbreak of COVID-19 on their units and provide advice on how to minimise the risk of the spread by re-enforcing prescribed physical distancing measures, hygiene measures and training. The success of any actions rests on hygiene measures and contact reduction.

The scenarios below will guide producers on how to deal with employees who show symptoms of the virus.

Critical Action Points

1. All staff must maintain a minimum distance of at least 2m between each other at all times. This significantly reduces the number of on farm close contacts for any individual. This reduces the possibility that all staff will need to self-isolate, should one employee become ill.
2. Avoid all face to face contact where possible.
3. All Staff should regularly wash their hands throughout the day. This should be facilitated by easy access to proper handwashing facilities, with access to warm water and soap.

COVID-19 Scenarios for Employers dealing with Employees

1. An employee becomes ill while at work

The manager/owner and the first aider should take responsibility to manage the situation. Offer the employee access to a private room/office which is well ventilated (Open window if possible). The employee should phone their GP (their own mobile phone is preferable) and outline their current symptoms. Allow the employee to go home and take the advice given by the GP. Ensure the office/room is sterilised after the employee leaves. Maintain regular contact with employee whilst they are off sick or self-isolating.

2. An Employee declares that they, a house mate, or an immediate family member has tested positive for COVID-19

The HSE will advise the staff member to remain at home. Public Health officials will interview the staff member in order to identify and trace known contacts. This could mean that other employees may be contacted individually and asked to present themselves for testing and possible self-isolation. You may need to facilitate the employee to ensure they receive the COVID-19 pandemic unemployment payment. Please see [COVID 19: Relevant Financial Supports for Horticultural Producers and their Employees](#).

3. What should I do if a staff member has a suspected case of COVID-19?

The person should contact their doctor and comply with the doctor's advice. The person may/may not have COVID-19, BUT you should assume that they do. The employer should maintain communication with them requesting to be kept informed. If, ultimately they are diagnosed with COVID-19, contact tracing is the clinical role of the HSE Department of Public Health, not by the employer.

i. What should the employee do?

The person with the suspected case must self-quarantine and follow medical advice. They should not return to work, for any reason until cleared to do so.

ii. What should the employer do?

As an employer, it is your responsibility to respect the employee's confidentiality; however it is important to identify any person(s) who may have been in close contact with the confirmed case without revealing the employee's identity. All 'close contacts' (i.e. closer than 2m of the infected employee for up to 15 minutes cumulative daily, or are house mates) of the suspected case must stay off work and restrict their movements (i.e. self-isolate). If the 2m social distance has been maintained on the unit, any contact tracing will focus on the person's accommodation and social contacts etc.

4. When can an employee come back to work?

An employee with a suspected or confirmed case of COVID-19 can return to work 14 days from the onset of symptoms and 5 days from the person's high temperature reading getting back to normal, whichever comes last (whichever is longer). However if a test is taken and comes back negative the employee can go straight back to work, as long as they are healthy and comply with the Health and Safety statement of the business.

COVID-19 Recommendations for Operating under Physical Distancing Guidelines

Recommendations to facilitate operating with a minimum 2m physical distancing

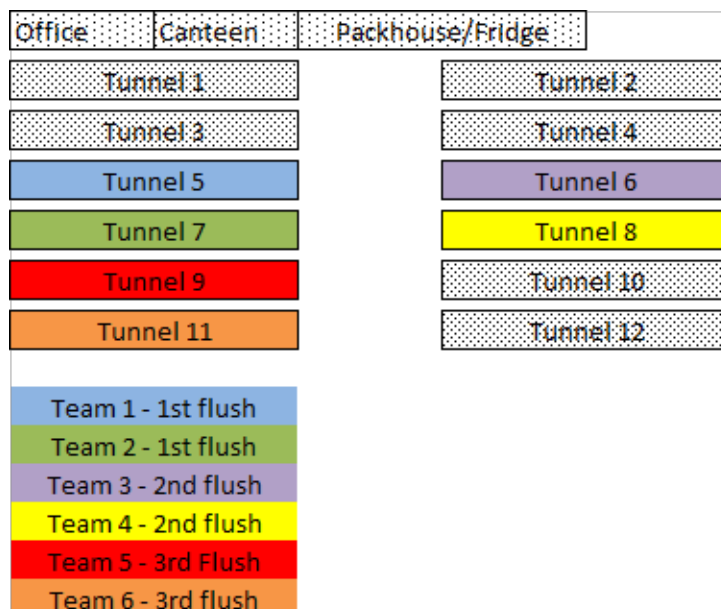
1. It is recommended breaking your employees up into different groups/teams. This may reduce the potential risk of virus spread between all the employees on the farm. Colour coding teams with hair nets, aprons or coats can be an effective management tool to easily identify any cross over between teams and help the grower actively manage team separation. Thought must be given to dividing teams up appropriately e.g. people living in the same premises or carpooling should be in the same team.
2. It's advised to stagger starting/finishing and break times to make it easier to maintain the 2m social distancing. Social distancing must be maintained in all areas including designated smoking areas.
3. Where a series of side by side wash hand basins and urinals exist alternating ones should be "closed down". All bins should be pedal operated. Strong preference for taps that are sensor or pedal operated.
4. Lean systems e.g. continuous work flow processing with employees in a process chain should be replaced with discrete, start to finish individual cells, 2m apart.

Figure 1: Suggested Break Schedule

	Team A	Team B	Team C	Team D
06:00	Start			
06:30		Start		
07:00			Start	
07:30				Start
09:00	15 min Tea Break			
9:15-9:25	Clean Down			
09:30		15 min Tea Break		
9:45-9:55	Clean Down			
10:00			15 min Tea Break	
10:15-10:25	Clean Down			
10:30				15 min Tea Break
10:45-10:55	Clean Down			
11:30	30 min Lunch Break			
12:00-12:10	Clean Down			
12:10		30 min Lunch Break		
12:40-12:50	Clean Down			
12:50			30 min Lunch Break	
13:20-13:30	Clean Down			
13:30				30 min Lunch Break
14:00-14:10	Clean Down			
14:30	15 min Tea Break			
14:45-14:55	Clean Down			
14:55		15 min Tea Break		
15:10-15:20	Clean Down			
15:20			15 min Tea Break	
15:35-15:45	Clean Down			
15:45				15 min Tea Break
16:00-16:10	Clean Down			

- Allocate a “Dedicated Infection Control Person”. This person is responsible for cleaning the canteen, door handles, toilets and smoking huts before and after each break. As one team finishes their break there should be a 5-10 minute clean down before the next team enters for their break. This requires strict planning of a rota as can be seen in Figure 2. The infection control leader is also responsible for cleaning electric door fobs and any other areas where staff may come in contact with to ensure the site is sterile.
- Trays and punnets should be laid out so that all pickers do not have to return to the same location to deposit trays and collect new punnets etc.

Figure 2: Zoning example implemented on a mushroom unit



Recommendations on the use of machinery and packing lines

1. Where possible change the layout of a line to maintain social distancing, while making sure that other safety risks are not created.
2. Slowing machinery/belts may allow work to continue with fewer people at greater spacing.
3. Creating barriers that can easily be cleaned e.g. stainless steel may be useful. Polycarbonate screens are best where line of sight is required for Health and Safety reasons. Cleaning must be carried out between shifts etc.
4. Where stretching across a line to pick produce, screens should extend across belts.
5. Conduct a risk assessment for any changes or possible screen breakages on a food packing line, daily checks for cracks and chips are suggested.
6. Dedicated machine should be assigned to a dedicated operator e.g. named buggy/ tractor/ fork lift for set employees only.
7. Sanitise machinery, handles, switches, levers, cabs etc. after each use.
8. Planting rigs for veg/forestry whips etc. need to be assessed to keep 2m spacing between people.

Other recommendations to reduce the risk of a COVID-19 outbreak on your farm

- Provide all staff with PPE – disposable overalls and gloves, P2 dust masks etc.
- Zoning must be implemented on production units/pack houses to reduce numbers of close contacts and to ensure 2m physical distancing is adhered to. Work areas can be divided into zones with personnel allocated to work within each zone. Zones could be identified by colour, number, section, etc. Movement between zones should be minimised and controlled at all times. This can be done in the production area by allocating a specific picking area to each picker or in the pack house by marking out areas or zones with coloured tape on the floor. In the canteen, zoning must also occur by restricting numbers of staff allowed to access the area at any given time and restricting the number of people per table. The same rule should apply to the toilets and smoking area.
- Wash machinery, equipment and trays with soap and water to remove dirt. Allow them to dry and then disinfect.
- Use disinfectant at the recommended concentration – stronger doesn't necessarily work better.
- Do not allow truck drivers/ hauliers out of trucks when loading/ unloading where possible and practical. Drivers are not to move around the site or enter any site buildings. Drivers should not be allowed access to the canteen or other onsite facilities.
- Disinfect yard, corridor, picking trolley and handheld equipment each day after production.
- Policies and SOP's should be updated to reflect the current physical measures being implemented on units to address the COVID-19 problem. Information on this document could be integrated into your current farm SOP's and policy's e.g. sick leave policy, staff welfare policy, hand washing policy etc.
- **No visitors should be allowed access to your unit.**

System to manage employee and stakeholder communications

- Appoint a co-ordinator or central contact point for questions if not the owner/manager
- It is important that employers have a robust communication strategy in place to prevent rumour and misinformation and to:
 - ◇ Provide up-to-date reliable information to employees;
 - ◇ Provide up-to-date reliable information to suppliers and customers;
 - ◇ Clarify the company's procedures and policies;
 - ◇ Ensure central visibility regarding resourcing and operational needs;
- This can involve cross functional team comprising key areas of a business or be a single appointment depending on the complexity of the business

COVID-19 Frequently Asked Questions (FAQs)

How is this virus spread?

The virus is droplet spread. The greatest risk is from an infected person coughing close to you or picking up a droplet with the virus off a surface where somebody with the infection has touched/coughed over. There is no indication that indoor or outdoor workers are infected any differently.

When is a person most infectious?

If the person has a high temperature and most likely, 2 days before the onset of the high temperature.

When can a person come back to work after a COVID-19 infection?

An employee with a suspected or confirmed case of COVID-19 can return to work 14 days from the onset of symptoms and 5 days from the person's high temperature reading getting back to normal, whichever comes last. However if a test is taken and comes back negative the employee can go straight back to work, as long as they are healthy and in accordance with the onsite Health and Safety statement.

Everybody is very anxious about COVID-19. Some are reluctant to come to work.

What can I do?

People are very worried about this virus. These are very uncertain times. As an employer you must make the workplace as safe as possible. It is recommended that:

- Lead by example and involve all of your employees in your on-farm efforts to minimise any risk of viral transmission. This will reduce the anxiety amongst those that are afraid to go into the workplace.
- Make staff aware that the workplace is safe and you are doing everything possible to keep the virus out of the work place and to stop the transmission of the virus.

What training do I need for my staff?

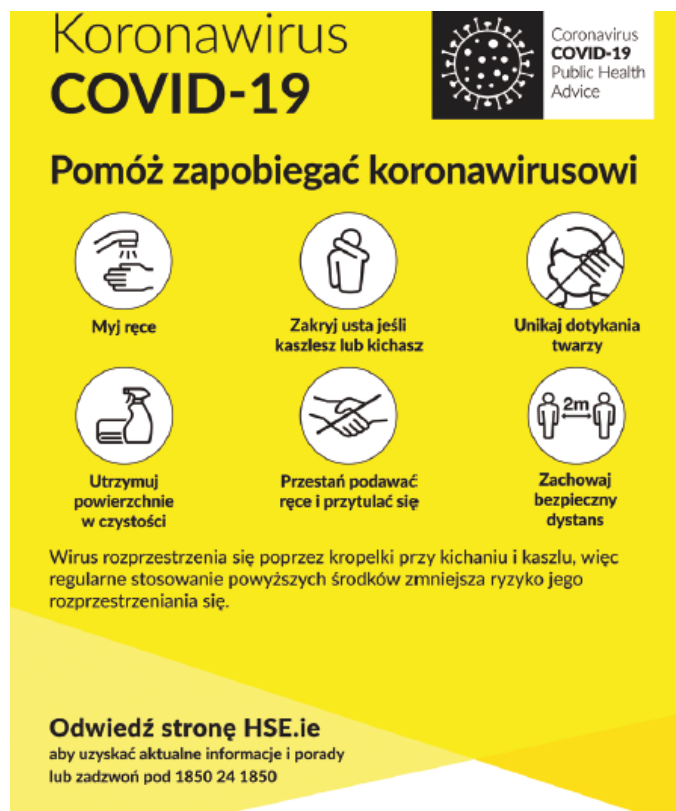
Employees must maintain a minimum of 2m from any other person on the farm. They must also maintain strict hygiene including washing their hands properly and frequently with warm water and soap, not touching their face etc. Employers should enforce mandatory hand washing before and after each break / shift. Hand sanitisers should also be freely available particularly in more remote sites. Managers should also lead by example by strictly adhering to these measures themselves.

Provide information and training to employees on the following areas. Please consult the Factsheets and Resources section below for assistance:

- Signs and symptoms of COVID-19
- How COVID-19 is spread
- Cleaning routines and hygiene controls (including respiratory hygiene, cough etiquette and handwashing and physical distancing)
- Correct use of Personal Protection Equipment (PPE) and medical equipment (e.g. thermometers, disposable gloves, masks, and disinfectants) as relevant
- What to do if an employee becomes unwell and believe they have been exposed to COVID-19
- When individuals on the production unit have had contact with a confirmed case of COVID-19
- Cleaning offices and general areas where there are suspected or confirmed cases of COVID-19
- Rubbish disposal, including tissues
- Travel Restrictions
- Restricted movement advice in terms of zones
- Familiarising key staff with the COVID-19 plans and SOPs which you should have
- Cross-training workers and establish covering arrangements and continuity plans to minimise disruptions.

This document provides most of the information or links to resources required by you to cover this training.

Figure 3: [Public Health Advice Poster Available in 11 Languages](#)



Can I check that employees are well each day when they turn up for work?

Yes. You must ask your staff to self-declare that they don't have the symptoms of COVID-19 before coming into the workplace. This is extremely important and a physical (or electronic) record of this declaration should be retained. Some employers are also checking the temperature of employees as they turn up for work each day. This can be done easily by using a hand held infrared thermometer. Where feasible, employers and managers should also check on employee's health during the working day.

Some Employees may be tempted to come into work when they are unwell for fear of losing income

Managers should provide clear guidance, including restating the Health and Safety procedures of the facility. They should remind employees of their responsibilities in maintaining a safe work environment and also employers should support their employees by providing them with information on existing government schemes to support them. Most of the relevant data has been collated in a previous [Teagasc Factsheet](#).

What about the 'close contact' colleagues of a worker suspected to have contracted COVID-19 who are at home self-isolating?

If the suspected worker gets tested and it comes back negative they can all go back to work provided they are well and can meet the normal return to work protocols. If the test comes back positive they must continue to restrict their movements for 14 days before going back to work. If during the 14 day period any of them develop symptoms they must self-isolate for 14 days starting from the day the symptoms show.

COVID-19 Factsheets and Resources

More detailed information available below:

- Posters for Public use in 11 Languages ([here](#))
- The Health Protection Surveillance Centre (HPSC) website ([here](#))
- The World Health Organisation (WHO) website ([here](#))
- Information on hygiene and hand washing is available from the Food Safety Authority of Ireland (FSAI) ([here](#)) and from the Health Service Executive (HSE) ([here](#))

Teagasc Contact

We remain available to discuss any issues of concern regarding your business. Please continue to engage with us by phone.

For a full list of Horticulture Staff contacts please see <https://www.teagasc.ie/crops/horticulture/>