

Returning safely

WTTC and IOSH guide to returning safely to work



Institution of Occupational
Safety and Health

In partnership with

The logo for the World Travel & Tourism Council, featuring a stylized green and yellow graphic above the text "WORLD TRAVEL & TOURISM COUNCIL" in a bold, uppercase, sans-serif font.

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www.iosh.com/returningsafely

WTTC and IOSH guide to returning safely to work

As Covid-19 lockdown measures begin to ease in many parts of the world, business leaders are considering how to restore service and production levels to as near “normal” as possible by bringing their workforces back to work. Responsible businesses will be putting the health and safety of their employees at the centre of their return-to-work process.

As you manage this complex process, the World Travel & Tourism Council and the Institution of Occupational Safety and Health suggest that you should consider four key areas.

- 1 Safe people 03
- 2 Safe workplaces 05
- 3 Safe equipment 06
- 4 Safe systems 07

Other useful advice and information

- Legal obligations globally 09
- Risk assessments 10

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1 Safe people

Think about how to change or adjust policies, procedures, leadership, working conditions and technologies to new ways of working. This will affect values, attitudes, behaviours, cultures and, ultimately, employees' health and wellbeing.

In managing and preventing the potential for negative wellbeing or mental ill-health there are three broad sets of considerations – communication, health promotion and controlling workloads, tasks and deadlines.



Communication

Communicate the organisational plan – be open, clear and honest with all employees. They have a right to know what you are doing to protect them and to help them to return to work safely.



Good leadership is imperative.
www.iosh.com/covid-19/maintaining-good-leadership-principles

Keep in regular contact with remote employees – aim to prevent feelings of isolation and loneliness if they are unable to return to work immediately. It's a good way to ensure that they are well and understand information and instructions.



Remember to consider and include remote employees in the return-to-work process.
www.iosh.com/coronavirus-remoteworkers

Set boundaries for working hours – allow employees to disengage from work when they need to, or introduce reduced working hours at the outset. Some of those returning to work may experience high levels of emotional stress. Compassion and flexibility will help employees feel more secure and safe when returning to work. This will also allow them to maintain a healthier work-life balance when they return home from work.

Encourage employees to discuss wellbeing or mental ill-health concerns – this can help to alleviate symptoms and create an open and compassionate culture which in turn leads to a more socialised reintegration into the workplace. Managers can learn about preventative measures to adopt in the future.

Provide motivating, morale-boosting messages to employees and praise their work – create more positive mindsets and improve wellbeing. At the same time, reassure employees that it is a normal response to be fearful, apprehensive and frustrated during the return-to-work process.



Health promotion for employees

Offer general wellbeing information – messages on general health promotion are as relevant as ever, but you may need more emphasis on disseminating health information and messages. You can highlight useful sources of information that focus on wellbeing and mental health – either advice online or mobile applications, for example.



See IOSH's series of wellbeing information videos on the IOSH YouTube channel.
youtu.be/MVrLQgMpmIY

Encourage healthy sleeping – encourage employees to get plenty of quality sleep. This can help them to keep healthy, be more productive, resilient and open to workplace changes during the return-to-work process.

Stand up regularly – it's beneficial for employees' health to take regular rest breaks and to stand up often. Extra movements, stretching and physical exercise can encourage social interaction while maintaining physical distancing.



For more general information on standing at work and the associated health effects, see here.
www.iosh.com/sit-less-move-more

Eat nutritious food – a healthier diet can help fight off infection and raise overall emotional and physical health levels, especially in the return-to-work process.

Encourage controlled breathing exercises – this can help people to relax when stressed. It also switches brain activity to a different part of the brain, encouraging more rational decision-making.

Encourage good standards of hygiene – educate employees in the importance of good personal hygiene and maintaining good hygiene of working equipment, e.g. wiping keyboards with cleaning products. Ensure employees follow any new cleaning procedures and regimes.

1 Safe people



Control workloads, tasks and deadlines

Provide varied tasks, if possible – this will promote dynamic thinking and working during the return-to-work transition. Fresh cognitive challenges can stimulate and motivate employees to be more productive.

Allow flexibility – to enable employees to manage their own health and that of others during their return to work. Allow them to take extra rest breaks if required and to address other concerns or issues. Ensure that work deadlines and timescales are reasonable to help reduce stress.

Understanding the need for mutual support through this unprecedented time and into the future is a sign of good leadership. Encouraging employees to be compassionate towards others can be rewarding for them and for the organisation as a whole. It will allow them to lead by example and inspire others to do the same.

Remind employees of your organisation's core values, attitudes and behaviours. Embed them in messages and demonstrate them through your leadership.

Planning an individual's return to work after illness

It is likely that all businesses, irrespective of their activities, have some staff who will have contracted the virus at some time during the Covid-19 pandemic. Moving towards "the new normal", occupational safety and health (OSH) professionals have a valuable role to play in planning and supporting employees' return to work. Specifically, they have the skills and experience that enable them to take the lead in implementing a four-point plan.



Learn more about planning an individual's return to work after illness.

www.iosh.com/returning-safely/planning-an-individuals-return



2 Safe workplaces

It's important to prepare a safe workplace and working environment before employees return – and to continue with physical distancing and good hygiene practice when employees have returned.

Give attention to the workplace and ways to make it safe, including how to minimise the spread of Covid-19. Once risk assessments are updated, organisations will need to make action plans with appropriate measures.

Think first about the Covid-19 risks. If people can work from home, eliminate the risk by encouraging them to do so. You will need to ensure your workplace is safe for employees who can't work from home.

Make reasonable adjustments, introducing changes to the workplace environment that allow your employees to work safely and productively. Make it clear that if anyone has any coronavirus symptom, such as a cough or fever, they must stay at home and not go to work.

Physical distancing

Physical distancing is a public health measure introduced in workplaces to reduce the spread of infection. It is important that you encourage this in your workplace, where possible, and employees observe the physical distancing guidance. Your health and safety professional will know of many methods you can introduce to manage flows of people around your premises, including one-way systems, using good signage, managing entry and exit points and changing layouts.

Good hygiene

Your workplace should be clean and hygienic. You should promote regular and thorough hand-washing with soap and provide hand sanitiser in dispensers around the workplace. These should be available to employees and to anyone entering the building or site.

Good respiratory health is advisable. A face covering does not give personal protection, but may protect others if infected. It can be simple and may be worn in enclosed spaces where physical distancing isn't possible. It doesn't have to be the same as those used in health and social care, which should be reserved for those frontline employees. Face masks are not a replacement for managing the risk and employees shouldn't rely on face coverings alone as a preventative measure.

Ensure all fixed work surfaces are cleaned with disinfectant. However, if this is not applicable, provide gloves to ensure the hygiene of the items being touched and moved about. These should be changed regularly, and hand washing should be encouraged to prevent infection. When purchasing and distributing gloves, consider any allergies the employees may have.

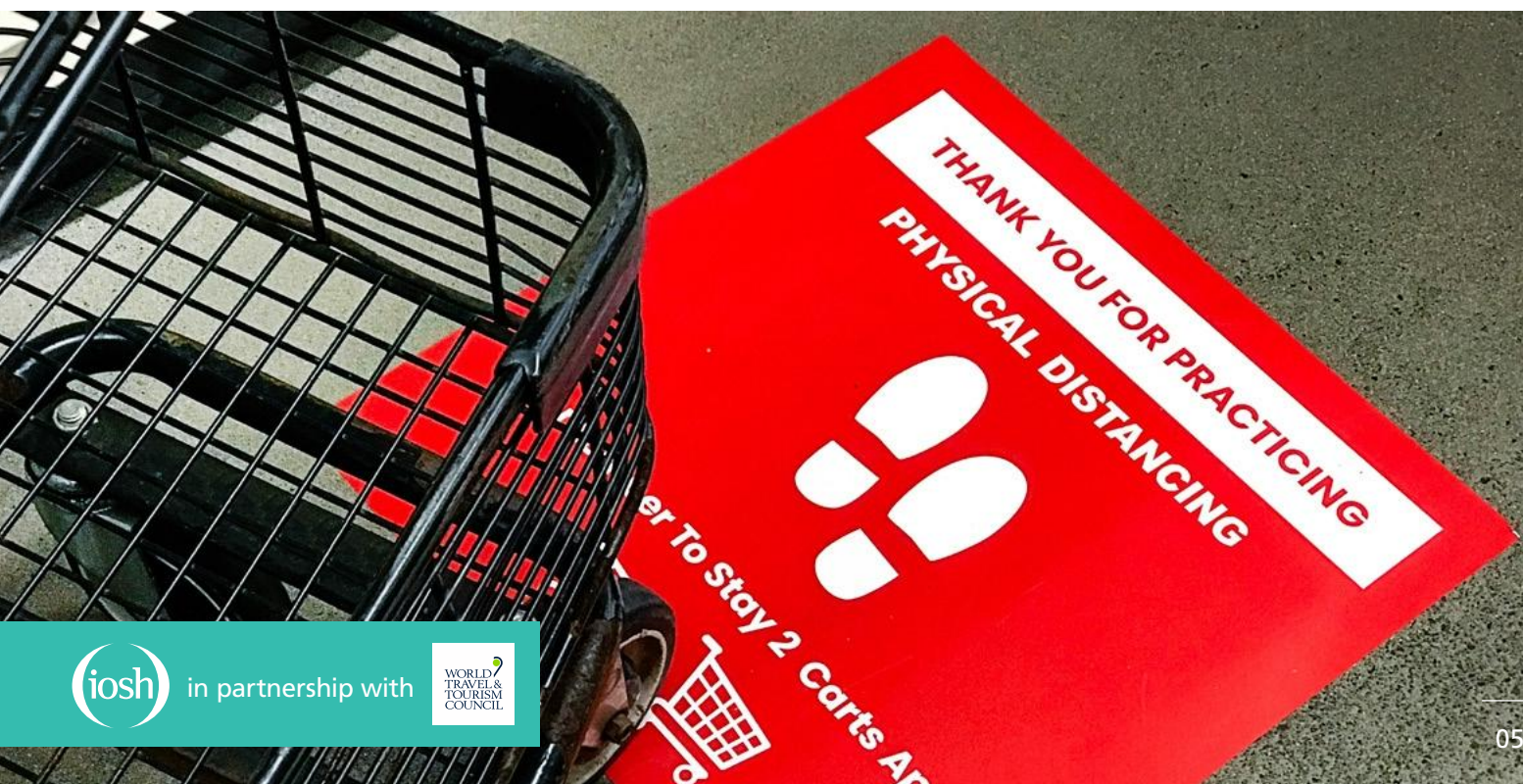
Discourage gatherings of people in excess of local legislation. Any meetings that can't be held virtually should only include a small number of people, adhering to the physical distancing guidelines and hygiene practices, and be held outdoors if possible.

Adaptations for staff and organisational culture

The reopening of your business premises will not happen overnight. Once you have made your premises safe, you must consider how your staff and organisational culture can adapt.



Find out more information on this topic.
www.iosh.com/returningsafely/workplaces



3 Safe equipment

Testing of equipment, whether statutory testing required by law or general daily checks of machinery, has been disrupted by Covid-19. To ensure that your equipment is kept safe to use, consider adopting the following advice on third party or external inspections and on in-house checks before giving the green light to re-start business.

Third party or external inspections

You should endeavour to fulfil all external and statutory inspections despite the current circumstances, giving access to external inspection bodies for statutory checks. Only cancel inspections if you have exhausted options to inspect safely.

Should there be issues in undertaking scheduled inspections, you should adopt a risk-based process to determine whether equipment is safe to use. When introducing physical distancing measures to the workplace, ensure that these aren't perceived to be a barrier to carrying out inspections.

In-house checks

In-house checks are completed daily, weekly, monthly or annually, depending on the type of equipment. Covid-19 has forced many organisations to close and therefore miss scheduled in-house checks.

Before re-starting business or any type of production, conduct checks on equipment to determine that it is safe to use. Should the equipment be deemed unsafe to use, you should plan alternative methods (determined by a risk assessment) to ensure business can sufficiently resume as normal. Alternative methods may include:

- extra supervision
- frequent checks and monitoring
- different equipment.

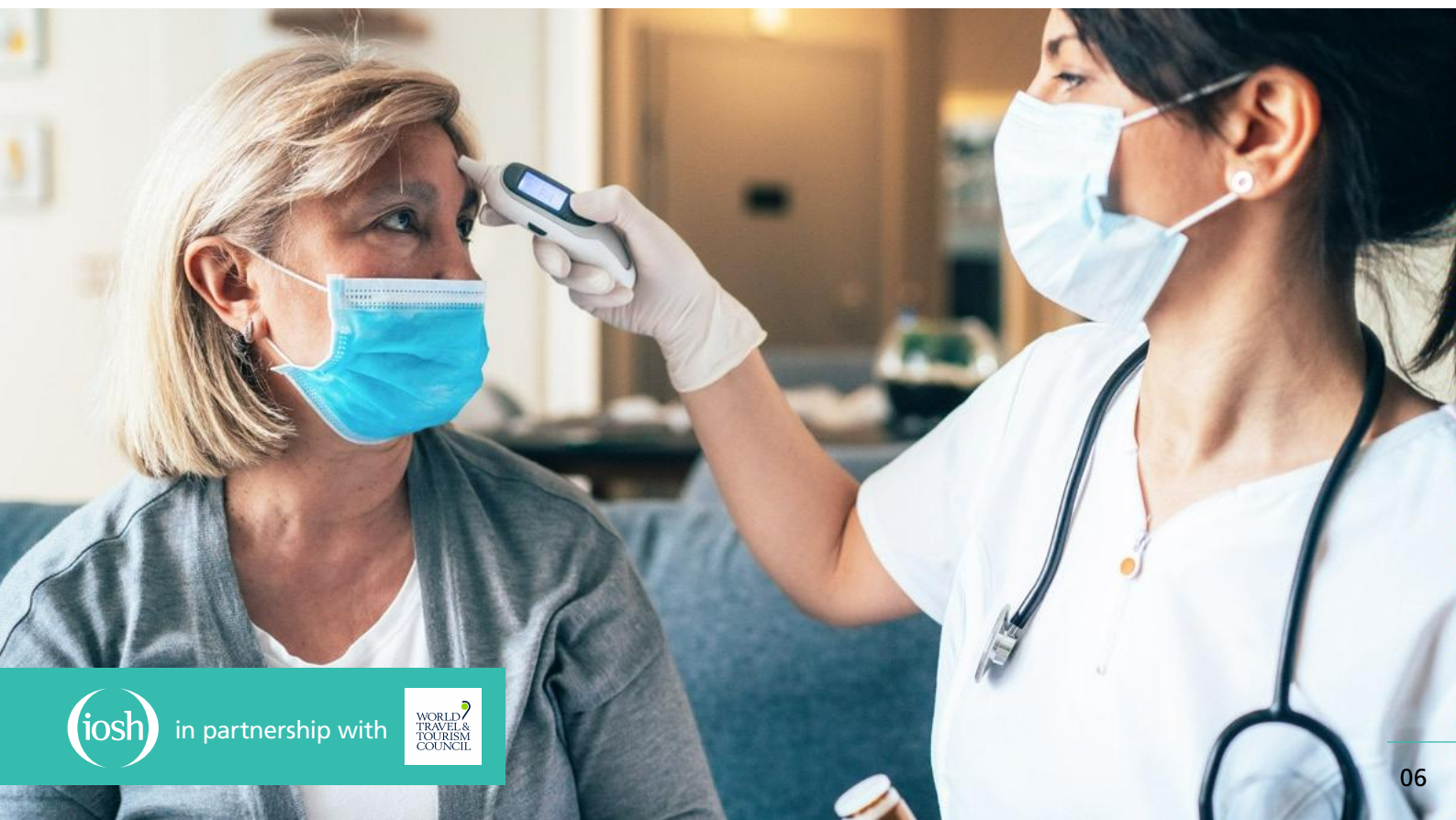
Brief employees to take extra caution when using work equipment, as unmaintained equipment could result in issues with breakdowns or present safety risks.

Your occupational safety and health team will point out where third party or in-house checks may have been missed, ranging from water systems to exhaust ventilation, and from racking and scaffolding, as well as fire inspections and routine machinery checks.

Managing supplies

Covid-19 has caused a significant rise in demand for personal protective equipment (PPE). Respiratory protection (RPE), face protection and gloves have all been used to protect people during the pandemic and this shouldn't be expected to stop with the return to work.

There may be a rise in the number of requests from your staff for respiratory masks and gloves. They may feel safer by continuing to use the safety controls put in place during the pandemic, in the case there is another outbreak.



4 Safe systems

As Covid-19 lockdown measures ease, we're facing workplace challenges that require us to modify or change completely how and when tasks are carried out. In some countries these are not too unfamiliar but in others, the restrictions, the physical and emotional environment and the behavioural changes are quite different.

Your workplace will have systems for managing safety and health. Whether these are informal or formal, documented and well established, you should review these systems, processes and procedures to ensure they remain suitable and sufficient to address your organisation's risk profile. The significant degree of change brought by Covid-19 is a legitimate trigger to review your occupational safety and health management systems.

IOSH model for occupational safety and health management systems

No two organisations have the same occupational safety and health management system. The details need to be customised to each organisation – sometimes to an individual site and maybe even to a particular team. However, the core framework and intent will be common to most.

Your occupational safety and health professionals will know of the elements that typically will need to be reviewed as a result of internationally acknowledged approaches to combatting the spread and the effects of Covid-19. They will look at what you will need to consider, under five major headings.

Policy and strategy

Think about your business direction – consider the impact of the virus on the strategic direction, financial stability and the resources available for the on-going viability of your strategy, vision and goals.

It may be that your products or services have changed. You may have decided that the protection of core business is your main priority.

Whatever the circumstances, you should have a policy statement of intent with clear targets and milestones. Leadership commitment should be visible to employees, whose expectations and degree of engagement will be affected accordingly.

Organisation

If your facilities and sites have reduced or increased in number or complexity, you will need to think about how you manage this.

There may have been an impact on your leadership resources may have been affected, and your organisational design may have changed. These will bring specific challenges.

As a leader, you may be under pressure to “perform” in uncertain, complex and ambiguous circumstances. Standards for good leadership practices should not be eroded. This is the time to demonstrate integrity and fairness, building employee confidence and trust in the leadership team.

You will need to consider how you harness your occupational safety and health team, whose particular skillsets will be an important asset to you right now. While they will have all the requisite technical skills, they should also be able to help you communicate to your workforce the health and safety steps you are taking.

A good leadership structure and good leadership practices will help to maintain trust and integrity.

Risk management and controls

Legislative and guidance requirements for safeguarding individuals in the workplace must be adhered to (disease detection, prevention and control). The nature of your organisation will of course determine the exposure potential and susceptibility of employees to infection.

As the safety and health culture in an organisation is greatly influenced by leadership behaviour, your response to Covid-19 could affect this – and potentially the business's reputation as a good employer in the community.

You will need your HR department to consider how you will deal with the likely increase in sickness and other absence and the approach you will take to shielded or vulnerable employees. An employee engagement strategy, a programme on reintroduction to the workplace and weighing up the possibility of critical skill erosion will be key considerations.

Your occupational safety and health team will need to take into account a whole host of adjustments to the workplace (including plant and equipment, supply chain, site accessibility and restrictions, inspection timetables, a new hygiene regime, physical or temporal adjustments, process changes, policies and rules – and how these are to be communicated – among many others.

4 Safe systems

Monitoring and measuring

The effectiveness of virus control measures is critical in sustaining operations. You should monitor these measures actively – some with fixed frequencies and some on an *ad hoc* basis. At the same time you will need to be able to respond reactively and investigate when controls cease to be effective or fail.

Ensure, of course, that the routine internal metrics reflect your priorities and concerns, which may include your set of key performance indicators, sickness or absence levels and indicators of wellbeing. You'll need to ensure that you monitor compliance with new or amended controls.

Look beyond your organisation too, to learn from events and developments at a global, national and local level, as well as within your own industrial sector. Consider benchmarking against peer organisations, for example.

Reporting

There may be changes to reporting requirements to your Board and to other governance requirements. Shareholders and other stakeholders will have a keen interest to know how you are managing the return to work and the impact on business.

Financial reporting will certainly be a key demand within a short time after the return-to-work process, but you may also be expected to report on non-financial matters too.



Legal obligations globally

It is important that you ensure your business complies with international and national law. IOSH's website highlights some of the key duties you should observe as an employer, wherever in the world your business is located.



www.iosh.com/returningsafely/legal-obligations

A case study of the UK illustrates the kinds of considerations that employers should be aware of in managing safe working during the pandemic.



Risk assessments

As isolation is eased and people return to work, governments may require organisations to complete risk assessments as part of the permission to resume normal service.

There will be no single set of assessments that will be applicable to all circumstances. Healthcare workers, retail cashiers, home delivery drivers, utility engineers and construction workers have different exposure to the coronavirus, and the risk assessments will necessarily be different too.



IOSH offers guidance on the questions that you will need to answer so that you are able to select the right type of risk assessment for your industry and business.

www.iosh.com/returningsafely/risk-assessments

Your occupational safety and health professional or team will be expert in selecting and conducting risk assessments and will be able to take a lead in implementing the necessary steps that arise from them.



Further guidance on returning safely

There is much more detail on the topics in this guide available from IOSH's website at www.iosh.com/returningsafely. Your safety and health professionals should already be primed about the resources that you can use to maximise your business effectiveness by ensuring that your workplaces operate safely and healthily.

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IOSH is the Chartered body for health and safety professionals. With over 48,000 members in more than 135 countries, we're the world's largest professional health and safety organisation.

We set standards and support, develop and connect our members with resources, guidance, events and training. We're the voice of the profession and campaign on issues that affect millions of working people.

IOSH was founded in 1945 and is a registered charity with international NGO status.

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