



From: HQ

Date: Wednesday 4 March 2020 at 11:59

Subject: VetALERT 10/20 - Coronavirus (COVID-19) - Advice for Veterinary Practitioners

Dear Veterinary Ireland Member,

With the first cases of Coronavirus (COVID-19) confirmed in Ireland over the last week, Veterinary Ireland is undertaking work with the Small Firms Association (SFA) and the Irish Congress of Trade Unions (ICTU) to ensure that Veterinary Ireland members are prepared for any disruption to their professional lives from COVID-19.

The SFA is providing information for employers in small businesses in relation to contingency planning, communications to employees (and clients), and contractual obligations of employers.

ICTU is calling on all employers to actively engage with staff and their representatives on any implications that might arise in the workplace, and in particular, that measures are agreed that seek to protect the health and safety of all workers but also ensuring that workers' incomes are protected. ICTU is also calling on the Workplace Relations Commission (WRC) to engage with its stakeholders to develop an agreed response to the issues arising from COVID-19.

Further details will be communicated to Veterinary Ireland members as additional advice is received, but in the meantime Veterinary Ireland would advise all members, employers and employees **to act prudently, and to monitor official Irish Government advice, as well as updates from the World Health Organisation (WHO).**

The attached **advice for veterinary practitioners** may be useful in this context.

Yours sincerely

A handwritten signature in black ink that reads 'Finbarr Murphy'.

Finbarr Murphy
Chief Executive



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COVID-19 – Information for Veterinary Practitioners March 2020

During the COVID-19 (Coronavirus) global situation, Veterinary Ireland would advise all members, employers and employees, **to act prudently, and to monitor official Irish Government advice, as well as updates from the World Health Organisation (WHO).**

The following advice is taken from a number of sources (see Section **3. Essential Websites**).

This document is provided for informational purposes only for the exclusive use of Veterinary Ireland members, with the aim to provide Veterinary Ireland members only with an overview of the issues that may arise during the COVID-19 global situation. This document is not comprehensive and is not a substitute for specialist advice, which should be sought and obtained by Veterinary Ireland members where appropriate.

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1. Symptoms of COVID-19

The Health Service Executive (HSE) advise that it can take up to 14 days for symptoms of COVID-19 to appear.

Symptoms of COVID-19 (Coronavirus) are:

- **A cough**
- **Shortness of breath**
- **Breathing difficulties**
- **Fever (high temperatures)**

If you think you have been in contact with a confirmed case of COVID-19, you should contact **HSELive on 1850-24-1850**.

If you develop symptoms of coronavirus, **avoid contact with others by self-isolating** (i.e. staying indoors and avoiding contact with other people).

Then, **contact your own GP or local emergency department (ED)**.

Do not go to your GP or ED - Phone them first. If you do not have a GP, phone 112 / 999 - You will be put in contact with your local Department of Public Health staff who will give you information and advice.

2. How COVID-19 is Spread

The HSE advise that COVID-19 is spread in sneeze or cough droplets. You could get the virus if you:

- come into close contact with someone who has the virus and is coughing or sneezing
- touch surfaces that someone who has the virus has coughed or sneezed on

Because it's a new illness, it is not known how easily the virus spreads from person to person. It is not known if someone can spread the virus before they show symptoms.

Current Information suggests that COVID-19 may only survive a few hours if someone who has it coughs or sneezes on a surface. Simple household disinfectants can kill the virus on surfaces. Clean the surface first and then use a disinfectant.

3. Essential websites

- **Irish Government advice on COVID-19:**
<https://www.gov.ie/en/publication/472f64-covid-19-coronavirus-guidance-and-advice/>
- **WHO general advice on COVID-19:**
<https://www.who.int/emergencies/diseases/novel-coronavirus-2019>
- **WHO advice to the public on COVID-19:**
<https://www.who.int/emergencies/diseases/novel-coronavirus-2019/advice-for-public>
- **HSE - COVID-19 Advice and Updates**
<https://www2.hse.ie/conditions/coronavirus/coronavirus.html>
<https://www.hse.ie/eng/services/news/newsfeatures/covid19-updates/>
- **HSE - COVID-19 Posters**
COVID-19 poster (PDF, 760KB, 1 page) Hand hygiene poster (PDF, 129KB, 1 page)
- **HSE's Health Protection Surveillance Centre (HPSC):** <https://www.hpsc.ie/a-z/respiratory/coronavirus/novelcoronavirus/>
- **HSE/HPSC Posters** <https://www.hpsc.ie/a-z/respiratory/coronavirus/novelcoronavirus/posters/>
- **HSE/HPSC Advice for Workers Dealing with the General Public:**
<https://www.hpsc.ie/a-z/respiratory/coronavirus/novelcoronavirus/guidance/employersguidance/Guidance%20on%20COVID%2019%20for%20workers%20dealing%20with%20the%20general%20public%20v2.pdf>
- **Dept of Business – Continuity Advice for Business during COVID-19 outbreak:**
<https://dbei.gov.ie/en/Publications/Business-Continuity-Planning-A-checklist-of-Preparatory-Actions-in-Responding-to-the-COVID-19-Outbreak.html>

4. WHO Guidelines on COVID-19

The World Health Organisation (WHO) has issued COVID-19, guidelines to **minimise the spread of infection**, and employers should consider this WHO guidance with employees and clients in communicating ways in which **everyone can protect themselves and those around them from COVID-19**.

Essentially, the steps to take **for everyone** are:

- **Wash your hands frequently**
(Soap and hot water or using an alcohol-based hand rub)
- **Maintain social distancing** (at least 3 feet / 1 metre)
- **Avoid touching eyes, nose and mouth**
- **Practice respiratory hygiene**
(cover sneezes / coughs with a bent elbow or a tissue, immediately dispose of tissue safely, and wash hands)
- **If you have fever, cough and difficulty breathing, seek medical care early**
- **Stay informed and follow any advice given by your healthcare provider**

5. Safety, Health and Welfare at Work

It should be noted that all **employers** have a duty of care to their employees to ensure their safety, health and welfare in the workplace. Employers are required by legislation to protect the health and safety of employees as far as practicable and provide a safe place of work for their employees.

Equally, **employees** have a duty of care to themselves, their co-workers and their employers to ensure the safety health and welfare of those they come into contact with in the course of their veterinary duties.

In light of the COVID-19 global situation, employers should carry out **additional risk assessments** in relation to any potential exposure to the virus, and **bio-security protocols** for all aspects of the veterinary working environment should be **reviewed and maintained**.

6. Contingency Planning for Veterinary Practices

The SFA is recommending that an appropriate person is designated within the business to develop a contingency plan to ensure that there is no delay in implementing agreed actions when required. The **Department of Business, Enterprise and Innovation website** has a **Business Continuity Planning Checklist** on its **COVID-19 webpage**. The Checklist contains some of the key risks to the continuity of business activities during the outbreak of COVID-19 and of preparatory actions that can be taken to respond, as well as direct links to COVID-19 resources, such as advice for employers, FAQs and posters, and issues such as prevention and control.

7. Veterinary Practice COVID-19 Policy

SFA are recommending that businesses draw up a policy on COVID-19 which should address a situation whereby an employee may be unable to attend work for fear of contracting the virus. This policy should be modified for an individual veterinary practice's business needs and should be communicated to practice staff to ensure adherence to the practice's absence procedure and minimise disruptions during this emergency period.

8. Absences from Work

There may arise instances where employees are absent from work either through contracting COVID-19, self-isolation or for having to care for family members, such as children who are affected by COVID-19 (i.e. Force Majeure).

In such circumstances, SFA advise that normal procedures and policies, including Sick-Leave / Sick-Pay, Force Majeure, Annual Leave or Unpaid Leave, should apply as with any other illness in the workplace.

As with any other absences from work, the employee should notify the veterinary practice and explain their potential absence, should it be on the foot of a diagnosis, or under "self-isolation".

While employers are not obliged by law to pay employees while absent, an employee's entitlements to pay will be in line with their **contract of employment** and any practice Sick-Leave / Sick-Pay, Force Majeure, Annual Leave or Unpaid Leave policy. It is therefore important that veterinary employers look at internal policies and procedures to evaluate the disruption of absences may have on their operations. As ever, employers must ensure fairness to all employees and manage such circumstances equally for all employees, when reverting to established policies and procedures in the case of COVID-19. It is also important for **employers to review their terms of employment for employees in order to operate within the law**.

That said, The **Department of Employment and Social Protection** is in the process of issuing guidance in relation to those employees affected by COVID-19, in relation to the financial reliefs available under Jobseeker Payment, Illness Benefit and Supplementary Welfare Allowance schemes, depending on whether they are absent with or without a medical certificate and / or at the request at their employer.

9. Communication between Employers, Employees and Clients

As expressed by ICTU, communication between all parties in a veterinary practice, including employers, employees and clients, is imperative. All such parties need to be aware of the **risk-minimising procedures** in place in the practice, not only the general WHO advice, but also any specific procedures in place in the veterinary practice. This can be done through the display of posters (such as those available from the HSE - **COVID-19 poster / Hand hygiene poster**), as well as through online and verbal communications, both internal and with clients.

A document of **Frequently Asked Questions (FAQs)** is also useful, and can identify a range of issues for all parties to consider during the COVID-19 global situation, including: information in relation to health and travel information; primary responsibilities for employers, employees and clients if there is potential exposure to COVID-19.

10. Closure of a Veterinary Practice due to COVID-19

While it is often not possible for those in veterinary practices to work from home, other aspects such as reducing non-essential business travel might be initially considered, while depending on ongoing risk assessments, it may become necessary for a veterinary practice to close due to COVID-19.

Where it does become necessary for an employer to close a veterinary practice due to COVID-19, and whereas it is not possible to undertake veterinary work from home, **employers should consider their options.**

While employers are not obliged by law to pay employees while absent, an employee's entitlements to pay will be in line with their contract of employment and any practice sick-pay policy. It is therefore important that veterinary employers look at internal policies and procedures to evaluate the disruption of absences may have on their operations.

Depending on contractual obligations, where a veterinary practice decides to close due to COVID-19, employers might consider paying employees as normal under such contractual obligations. Failure to do so, where an employee is available for work may lead to claims against the employer under breach of contract or payment of wages legislation.

Where it is permitted in a contract of employment, employers might also consider other measures, such as requiring employees to take Annual Leave or Unpaid Leave, or considering Lay-Off or Short-Time for employees. Such decisions should be taken on a case-by-case basis, but employers must ensure fairness to all employees and manage such decisions equally for all employees.

As with Section **8. Absences from Work**, it is therefore important for **employers to review their terms of employment for employees in order to operate within the law.**

11. Conclusion

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