Fact Sheet on COVID-19

Water Utilities and Peak Water Associations

As a global community of practice, we are learning fast about how the COVID-19 pandemic is affecting organisations providing water supply, sanitation and sewerage services.

This Fact Sheet focuses on the health and safety of water and wastewater utility workers, and shares experiences from Australian water utilities on how they are responding. This information is tailored for international water utilities, especially those in developing countries in the Indo-Pacific.

It is acknowledged that in many regions water utilities may not exist, or where they do exist, may serve only a portion of the community. In such situations COVID-19, like many other pathogens, may not be adequately controlled.

Providing reliable safe water, sanitation and sewerage services is essential

The supply of safe water and provision of sanitation and sewerage services is essential. It is the most important part of the preventive public health system, protects the environment and provides water for other essential uses. As a result, water utility staff are deemed essential service workers, and their work has to continue for the wellbeing of the community.



Understanding the virus to help control its spread

The following points about how the COVID-19 virus spreads can help guide workplace health and safety management.

The two main transmission pathways are:

a. Direct transmission: viruses passed on from an infected person in exhaled mucous and droplets from the lungs and throat (when they cough, sneeze or talk) entering the mouth, nose or eyes of another person. Keeping a distance physically – also known as 'social distancing' – helps reduce the chance of transmission. b. Indirect transmission: exhaled droplets containing the virus landing on a surface and then being transferred to the mouth, nose or eyes of another person. Minimising touching potentially contaminated surfaces, cleaning and sanitising such surfaces, washing hands and avoiding touching the face helps reduce the spread.

Other useful information about viruses that can help guide workplace health and safety actions and procedures includes the following:

- Viruses are microscopic particles (too small to see).
- Viruses can only multiply if they infect someone.
- The structure of COVID-19 comprises an oily envelope, so water and soap or detergents and antiviral hand sanitisers (e.g. ≥ 60% alcohol) are effective; surfaces can be cleaned with antiviral disinfectants including wipes and sanitising solutions.



Practising good hand hygiene

- Hand hygiene is one of the most effective ways to minimise disease transmission.
- Keep hands clean by minimising contact with surfaces and other people.
- Handwashing facilities or hand sanitisers should be available at all sites.
- Frequent hand washing or sanitisation should be practiced by all staff.
- Handwashing or sanitisation should be thorough and take 20 seconds.
- Display handwashing guidance posters at handwashing facilities (refer to WHO guide).
- If handwashing frequency is high, or staff have sensitive skin, seek advice from a dermatologist. Examples of solutions may include:
 - Wet hands before using soap to avoid contact with soap on dry skin.
 - Thoroughly wash off the soap after use by thorough rinsing.
 - Remove jewellery if irritation is linked to those spots.

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- Use warm water (not hot or cold) to wash.
- Use a simple, fragrance-free, mild soap.
- Dry hands with paper towel immediately and thoroughly after washing.
- Use alcohol-based hand sanitisers over soaps.
- Use gloves to reduce the need for handwashing, whilst avoiding cross-contamination where possible.
- Apply Vaseline or other fragrance-free sensitive skin barrier creams.
- Changing the work task if there are wounds or cracks in the skin.

Sharing workspaces and equipment safely: Practical tips

- Maximise working from home and from office locations with less staff on site.
- Minimise in-person meetings use telephone or video conferencing where possible.
- Minimise the number of people attending essential meetings.
- Consider stretching out working days and using shifts so less people are on site.
- In workspaces and meetings practice physical distancing (as per government recommendations) between people.
- Avoid hugging, shaking hands and kissing when greeting coworkers.
- Maximise ventilation of rooms and consider using outdoor areas.
- Minimise touching of shared surfaces (vending machines, taps and handles).
- Prop open doors (when safe to do so) to minimise touching door handles.
- Minimise sharing of equipment (computers, printers, copiers, stationary, etc.).
- Have antiviral disinfectant wipes and sanitisers present.
- Clean surfaces with soap and water or antiviral agents regularly.
- Sanitise "frequent-touch" surfaces daily (handrails, door handles and benches).
- Wipe shared surfaces before and after use with antivirals and sanitisers.
- Avoid sneezing or coughing near others and onto surfaces.
- If masks are used, they need to be of suitable quality and properly fitted and removed.
- Minimise shared dining spaces eat/drink at own desks or at a distance.
- Wash kitchenware properly (hot water and detergent or dishwasher on hot setting).

- If food is stored and prepared keep it under cover as far as reasonably practicable.
- Reduce the number of chairs and tables to discourage larger gatherings.
- Include hand wash stations in field vehicles that work with wastewater.
- Allocate vehicles to one person where practical to prevent crosscontamination.
- Provide field workers with their own sets of tools where practicable.
- Minimise use of crowded public transport that does not allow for physical distancing.
- On public transport, practice physical distancing (≥ 1.5 m separation).
- For items that cannot be sanitised wear disposable gloves when handling.
- If handwashing facilities and sanitisers are not available, wear disposable gloves.
- Gloves should be safely removed after use (refer to WHO guide).



Separating critical workers

- It is important to avoid multiple key staff becoming ill or asked to isolate.
- Identify and group critical tasks and the associated staff, and groups of staff, that undertake those tasks. Find ways to split up and separate teams.
- Some staff could be tasked to desktop and planning activities.
- If there is only one workspace keep workers on different shifts.
- Limit non-essential visits by others to sites where critical workers are located.
- Reduce interaction and shared use of facilities, so far as reasonably practicable.
- Provide additional vehicle, tools and equipment where practicable.
- Consider temporary leases to split teams and reduce crosscontamination.





Working with contractors and suppliers

• Utilities should provide advice to contractors and suppliers that reflects its advice to internal staff and see how that aligns with advice provided from those companies.



Returning home

- Provide advice on preventing the transfer of pathogens from potentially contaminated surfaces or materials in the workplace to persons at home.
- Advice may include changing at work, cleaning and sanitising, maintaining physical distance until getting changed and showered, and keeping potentially contaminated items wrapped until they can be sanitised, washed or disposed of.



Planning for contingency and continuity

- Secure support staff and your supply chains of items required for ensuring workplace health and safety (tissues, soap, antiviral wipes and/or sanitisers.
- Staff from other utilities and third parties may need training to familiarise them with sites in case they are to be drawn upon at short notice.



Prioritising activities

- Arrangements need to be put in place to ensure functional operation of treatment plants and networks and this core activity should take precedence.
- Non-urgent and non-essential monitoring activities should be postponed where possible.



Working with wastewater

- Additional risks to sanitation and sewer workers from COVID-19 are thought to be low compared to those from much more transmissible viruses.
- For tasks that currently require personal protective equipment (PPE) existing PPE requirements still apply (refer to WHO guide).



Protecting higher risk workers

- Identify workers at higher risk of serious complications, being those aged 60+ for the general population, or those with underlying health conditions.
- As far as reasonably practicable, prioritise modifying the work patterns of higher risk staff to minimise their contact with others whilst helping them deal with isolation.











Working safely from home

- Home-based working can still be hazardous. Consider tripping hazards, workstation ergonomics, heavy lifting, and electrical safety.
- Longer term home-based work can negatively impact mental and physical health of staff, so maintain regular communication and provide additional support and resources where needed.



Encouraging self-isolation as needed

• People are most infectious during the first few days of showing symptoms. If staff have signs and symptoms of COVID-19, or have been in contact with an infected person, they should call a Doctor or medical advice line, and should self-isolate at home until cleared by a Doctor.



Raising awareness

- Raising awareness of relevant information is a useful way of familiarising staff with COVID-19 control practices and answering questions.
- Emails, posters, demonstration videos and webinars can be used to share information with staff on these and other related guidelines and ongoing updates.



For the full COVID-19 Utility Guidance and other resources, visit waterpartnership.org.au/our-offering/covid-19

For full and up-to-date details on COVID-19 in general, including in relation to water and sanitation, refer to the World Health Organization COVID-19 advice for the public.

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