

How to work safely

Guidance for UNISON members

Throughout the pandemic there have been numerous, and sometimes confusing, changes to government guidance and different restrictions depending on where you live and work.

Whilst the government in England has chosen to remove all Covid safety measures, Scotland, Cymru/ Wales and Northern Ireland governments have chosen to take a more precautionary approach to the easing of their restrictions. Members should therefore ensure they are aware of the specific requirements for their location of work and travel.

However, some things have not changed. Your employer is legally required to do everything they reasonably can to keep you safe at work.

UNISON is here to support members through these changes. If you have any questions or concerns about any of the things mentioned in this guidance, or are worried that your employer is not properly assessing the risks and taking steps to protect you at work, you should contact your UNISON health and safety rep. You can do this via your UNISON branch. If you don't know how to contact your branch use our branch contact finder at <https://branches.unison.org.uk/>

Your UNISON branch health and safety rep will then be able to raise your concerns with your employer and, if necessary, escalate the matter further.

You will also find more information on our website at <https://www.unison.org.uk/coronavirus-rights-work/>

Staying safe

Employers have a legal responsibility to protect staff and others from risk, while enabling them to carry out their jobs effectively. They must start with a risk assessment where they prioritise measures that eliminate or minimise the risks.

In relation to COVID-19, as a minimum, UNISON expects employers to be including the risk of catching covid at work as part of their risk assessment and to follow public health guidance on reducing the risks.

In Wales and Northern Ireland employers are still required to undertake specific COVID-19 risk assessments.

Employers must consult with trade union safety reps and should, where possible, jointly agree and publish proposed safe systems of work and risk assessments.

Employers should also take additional steps to protect workers who may be more at risk from COVID-19 including pregnant workers, those whose immune system is weakened due to medication or a health condition.

We expect employers to consider the following options to help keep staff safe while they are working.

Working from home

Working from home remains the most effective way of reducing workplace exposure to and spread of the virus. As a minimum, employers should follow national government instructions and guidance on home working.

Where national governments no longer advise home working, employers can still retain this as an option. Vulnerable workers may need to continue to work from home. Employers still have a duty to protect home workers from risks to health and safety. For more information read <https://www.unison.org.uk/content/uploads/2021/12/Homeworking-and-hybrid-working-safely.pdf>.

Consultation should take place with union reps on any plans to move to permanent home working or a mixture of home and employer workplace (so called hybrid working).

If you are required to go to work Returning to the workplace

When encouraging a return to the workplace, employers should implement a phased return, and a rota-based system to ensure the environment is not crowded, to reduce the risk of transmission.

They should also recognise that some workers will be anxious about a return and should support staff by for example, allowing them to stagger their journeys on public transport to and from work at less busy times.

If you are required to go to your physical workplace

If you are required to go into work, your employer should carry out a risk assessment, consult with your health and safety reps and do everything they reasonably can to keep you safe from covid infection.

This includes identifying who may be at risk of infection and putting in measures to reduce the risk of exposure. As a minimum employers should implement public health guidance for the country you work in. This includes keeping workplaces clean, well ventilated and supporting staff to stay off work if they have symptoms of covid.

UNISON expects employers to review health and safety measures and risk assessments where clusters of staff are going off sick with covid, following changes to government guidance or the emergence of a new variant. Employers and unions should work together to continually monitor the impact of these changes.

If you have concerns about the safety of your workplace, speak to your local UNISON rep and discuss any issues with your employer.

When making changes to the workplace, employers should consider how access for disabled people can be maintained and how changes might impact on agreed reasonable adjustments for disabled workers. In addition, we know that change and uncertainty, especially when people are worried about their health and safety, can give rise to mental health issues. Employers should be aware of government guidance and offer staff support if they need it. UNISON's There for You charity can also provide signposting to emotional support, go to <https://www.unison.org.uk/get-help/services-support/there-for-you/>.

Keeping workplaces clean

Workplaces should continue to be cleaned more frequently, paying close attention to high-contact objects like door handles, stair handrails, desks and any shared equipment. Employers should display more signs reminding staff and others to wash their hands regularly and ensure that supplies of handwash and hand sanitiser are replenished more frequently than usual. They should also communicate to staff and visitors changes to the cleaning regime.

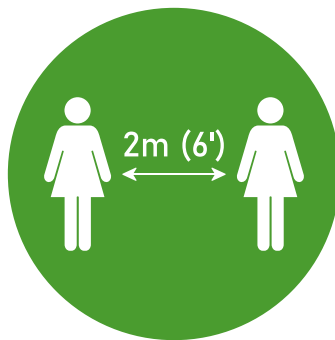


Social (physical) distancing

Social distancing rules have been removed across the UK, however, physical distancing remains a way of reducing exposure to the virus. The virus spreads more easily when in close contact with people in an enclosed workspace.

In line with public health guidance, employers may still ask employees and visitors to observe distancing in addition to other measures such as effective ventilation, layout of the workplace and physical barriers as part of an employer's risk assessment. They can also consider all other ways of maintaining social distancing by staggering start times, creating one-way walk-throughs, opening more entrances and exits, or changing seating layouts, to maintain the distance between them and ensure

they are facing away from each other. UNISON has produced social distancing guidance which you can find at <https://www.unison.org.uk/coronavirus-rights-work/social-distancing-workplace/>



Ventilation

As more is known about the modes of transmission of As more is known about how the Coronavirus which causes COVID-19 spreads, good ventilation has been identified as a key factor in dispersing and seeking to reduce the level of exhaled aerosol particles that are produced as part of our normal breathing patterns. These particles can stay suspended in the air for a long period of time, therefore, effective fresh air ventilation is important in helping to dilute and disperse these particles.

Employers have a legal duty to ensure that workplaces have an adequate supply of fresh air which can be natural or mechanical ventilation. This is even more important when dealing with Coronavirus.

Areas where the air feels stuffy or smells bad can indicate ineffective ventilation. Employers must take practical steps to improve both natural and mechanical ventilation, including stopping the recirculation of air in mechanical systems; ensuring

that the air flow is least 10 litres per person per sec with minimum of 6 air changes an hour; opening windows and doors and reducing the occupancy in rooms. As we exhale Carbon Dioxide (CO₂), by measuring its levels it can help identify whether an area is poorly ventilated.

UNISON supports the use of CO₂ monitors as part of the overall risk assessment process with the clear understanding that they are not a solution to the problem of poor ventilation but an indicator that something needs to be done to improve the air quality.

The links below provide further information on ventilation and CO₂ monitoring.

https://www.unison.org.uk/content/uploads/2021/07/26474_final.pdf

<https://www.hse.gov.uk/ventilation/overview.htm>

Where members visit domestic premises employers should communicate with residents and encourage them to ventilate the premises e.g., open windows just before and during the visit.

Ventilation in vehicles used for work should also be assessed and systems set to draw in fresh air and not recirculate.

Where staff are especially vulnerable to COVID-19 or have protected characteristics

Within the risk assessment, employers must consider the risks to staff who are more vulnerable to infection including those who are Black, disabled, pregnant, over 70, have underlying health conditions, those who are exempt for vaccination due to health conditions and those immunocompromised and immunosuppressed individuals who may not have responded so well to the vaccine.

UNISON has produced Guidance on Risk assessments for Black, disabled and other vulnerable workers <https://www.unison.org.uk/content/uploads/2020/06/Templaterisk-assessment-for-Black-and-other-Vulnerable-Workers.pdf>

Advice regarding "Working from home" (see above) is particularly important for disabled, pregnant and older workers and those with an underlying health condition. Refusal of home working for individuals covered in the group above might amount to unlawful discrimination under the Equality Act.

If home working is not reasonable, disabled workers and those who are pregnant should be offered the option of the safest available on-site roles, particularly if they might normally spend time within two metres of others. Your employer should undertake a risk assessment which carefully assess what is an acceptable level of risk in light of all available information, keeping you updated on what they identify and any additional steps they need to take to keep you safe.

Where you cannot work from home, and your employer cannot reduce the risks to an acceptable level they should consider offering special paid leave and other types of adjustments. Disabled and

pregnant workers should not be put on sick pay if not sick or forced to take annual leave or unpaid leave, they should be paid as normal.

Pregnant workers should not be forced to commence maternity leave earlier than planned because the employer cannot reduce the risks, again they should receive their normal full pay.

If your employer will not let you work from home or allow paid leave, or has not undertaken a satisfactory risk assessment, please contact your local UNISON branch for help.

The employer must also ensure that any measures they take do not unfairly discriminate against anyone on the grounds of age, race, sex, disability or other protected characteristic, and that reasonable adjustments for disabled workers are provided.

Personal protective equipment (PPE)

Depending on the work activity, you may be required to wear PPE (surgical face masks or respirators, aprons/gowns and gloves). This depends on what you do, where, and with who you work. PPE should only be provided following a risk assessment, with all other steps taken to reduce the risks, it must be provided by your employer (free of charge), along with any training required for its safe use and disposal, be certified as meeting legally required standards. PPE is provided to keep the wearer safe from infection, and must not be confused with items such as face coverings/visors etc.

More information and guidance on who requires PPE and how it should be used can be found at <https://www.unison.org.uk/coronavirus-rights-work/personal-protective-equipment-coronavirus/>

Face covering

Face coverings can help reduce the risk of transmission of the virus and in areas where there is not a mandatory requirement for them to be worn, employers should consider requiring their use in crowded areas, where social distancing cannot be maintained or areas where there is poor ventilation e.g. lifts.

Employers also have a duty to remind anyone to wear face coverings wherever it is mandatory to do so. Where workers interface with the public and are asked to enforce requirements, employers need to ensure that they are supported to do so, and steps are taken to protect them from verbal and physical abuse.

Face coverings must not be used as a replacement for PPE, as they do not provide the level of protection against the risk of infection that certified PPE does.



Covid infection and isolating

There is no longer a legal requirement to self-isolate, but if someone at work develops COVID-19 symptoms employers should support them to follow government and public health advice and stay at home.

The guidance on the length of time you should isolate for varies across the UK. There may also be different isolation requirements if you work in health or social care or education. See links to country and sector specific advice at the top of the page.

Further advice on what employers should do, including the support they should provide for staff who are required to self-isolate is available [on the government website](#).

If you feel your employer is going against legal requirements or public health advice and pressurising you to come into work after testing positive or with symptoms of Covid, contact your [UNISON branch](#) for advice.

How to raise a concern

Remember, if you have concerns about what is happening in your workplace, please speak to your health and safety rep who you can contact via your UNISON branch. You can get contact details for your branch at <https://branches.unison.org.uk/>

UNISON health and safety reps are working hard to ensure that employers are making our workplaces safe for all staff and service users. Are you interested in helping? Email us at HealthandSafetyUnit@unison.co.uk to find out more about being a health and safety rep.