

Social distancing in the office: working together to protect us all

We want to do all we can to keep everyone safe from the risks posed by COVID-19, so we continuously working to NHS, Public Health England and UK Government guidelines regarding social distancing to best protect us all. With more people coming back into our offices, we have been preparing to re-double our effort.

We are doing this through the rollout of the COVID-19 Workplace Actions campaign in all sites over the coming weeks. The focus on “Your Colleagues Need You” has been designed by behavioural scientists from the Centre for the Protection of National Infrastructure (CPNI) in conjunction with experts across occupational health, HR, building management, security, and health and safety.

We have put in place a large number of measures to minimise the risk to staff. This has included:

- Rolling out a comprehensive change programme to encourage staff to implement and maintain social distancing and hygiene behaviours in the office
- Establishing clear guidelines on maximum capacity for lifts and kitchens
- Designing, printing and putting up over X instructional signs and posters across the estate, specifically on kitchens, lifts, meeting rooms, and toilets stating the assessed capacity of that space with 2m distancing to provide guidance to staff
- Implementing an alternate desk policy, including putting out over X signs on desks across our buildings
- Installing markers on the floor at some communal areas, like lifts and canteens
- Clearly sign-posting the main one-way staircases
- Installed new washbasins to make hand washing quicker and easier
- Training a network of CV-19 reps from every section to ensure the campaign is embedded effectively at a local level and there are contact points for enquiries

Advice from Public Health England remains that social distancing measures, basic hygiene behaviours and reducing interactions are the most critical ways we can do this. Following this advice, the campaign is on four key actions that we all have a responsibility to undertake in the workplace:

- Make meetings virtual
- Keep your distance
- Wash your hands and clean your desk
- Say if it's not okay

Your colleagues need you to:

Make meetings virtual

The lockdown measures imposed by the government were designed to reduce the number of people we each encounter on a given day to slow the spread of the virus. To reduce the interactions we have in the workplace, we should try to limit the number of face-to-face meetings we have to a minimum. Meetings are an important part of day to day work, so we must adopt new practices to reduce contact.

Try to:

- ensure your meeting is inclusive
- always consider alternatives to a face-to-face meeting
- meet face-to-face only in situations where a virtual meeting is not feasible or appropriate
- take time to learn about the available technology that you can use to hold virtual meetings
- use telephone and screen sharing services (e.g. Teams or Skype) to hold meetings
- use your judgement on maximum room capacity when using meeting rooms to adhere to social distancing
- only move to other parts of the building where absolutely necessary, to reduce the number of people you encounter

Face-to-face meetings can't be eliminated, but they can be reduced by using the available alternatives. Large rooms must be kept free for urgent meetings that can't be done virtually, to allow your colleagues to have maximum distance.

Keep your distance

Staying physically spaced out from others in the workplace is a good way to reduce the risk of transmission.

Try to:

- always leave a gap of one desk between you and your nearest colleague where possible
- choose a desk where you are not directly facing a colleague
- don't enter an over-crowded lift; take the stairs if you can
- be conscious of the needs of others when using shared spaces so they can stay distanced too
- move around the building in a considerate way that allows others to preserve distance

In some situations, you cannot avoid close contact with others in the workplace. When this happens, work with your local COVID-19 rep to resolve it. Try to minimise the time you are in close contact to as short a time as possible (less than 15 minutes) and avoid positioning directly face-to-face if possible.

Wash your hands and clean your desk

Practicing good personal hygiene will help to reduce transmission of the virus. Even if you are not infectious, your hands can move the virus between surfaces. Keeping your hands and the surfaces you touch clean will help you to look after yourself and your colleagues.

Try to:

- wash your hands regularly with soap and water for 20 seconds; especially before eating or drinking
- set a calendar reminder to wash your hands
- keep your hands away from your eyes, nose and face
- clean your desk using the wipes provided; focus on your phone, keyboard and mouse

Washing your hands is most critical. Complete coverage of the hands with soap is important because the cells of the virus start to physically disintegrate on contact with soapy water and are destroyed entirely in around 20 seconds. It also helps to detach virus cells that adhere to the skin. Water alone is not sufficient. Strong alcohol-based hand sanitisers are also effective, but not as good as good old-fashioned soap!

Say if it's not okay

When people are busy and focused on doing their jobs at work, it is easy for them to forget to do the right thing, and to forget the impact this has on others around them. If you find yourself in a situation where you are uncomfortable with others' behaviour around social distancing or hygiene, feel empowered to speak up, to look after yourself and your colleagues.

You might speak up when:

- there are too many people coming into a contained space you are in, such as a lift or kitchen
- you have been asked to attend a face-to-face meeting that could be held virtually to reduce contact
- you are in an unavoidable face-to-face meeting, but others are too close to you and could easily space out

People will always make occasional mistakes and sometimes forget the needs of others so bear these points in mind when speaking up:

- raise your points politely and respectfully, and explain why the situation has made you uncomfortable

- if you can, try to propose a better solution that you'd be more comfortable with
— perhaps you need a bigger meeting room or to physically space out
- try to respond politely and positively to the challenges of others and be supportive of any changes they suggest, if possible