



## **ECOWAS COMMUNITY COVID-19 PANDEMIC RISK COMMUNICATION ADVICE FOR STAFF**

The Covid-19 epidemic infection which started in China in January 2020 is now a global pandemic. The epidemic has now largely ended in China but is spreading rapidly in other parts of the world including Africa.

The first case in the ECOWAS region was confirmed on 28 February in Nigeria. By 22 March, just over three weeks later, there have been 172 confirmed cases in 12 ECOWAS Member States - Burkina Faso 64, Senegal 47, Ghana 16, Côte d'Ivoire 14, Nigeria 12, Togo 9, Liberia 3, Benin 2, Guinea 2, Niger 1, The Gambia 1, and Cabo Verde 1; with 3 deaths in Burkina Faso.

The following advice has therefore been prepared by West Africa Health Organization (WAHO) for the ECOWAS Community based on international recommendations<sup>1</sup>, with the objective being to protect staff, facilitate work during the pandemic and contribute to containment of the pandemic in the region.

### **How COVID-19 spreads?**

When someone who has COVID-19 coughs or exhales they release droplets of infected fluid. Most of these droplets fall on nearby surfaces and objects such as desks, tables or telephones.

People within one meter of the infected individual could themselves become infected by breathing in these droplets of infected fluid. Other people could get infected by touching the contaminated surfaces or objects, and then touching their eyes, nose or mouth without first washing their hands thoroughly. COVID-19 therefore generally spreads in a similar way to flu.

Most persons (over 80%) infected with COVID-19 experience mild symptoms and recover. However, some go on to experience more serious illness and may require hospital care. Risk of serious illness rises with age - people over 40 years old seem to be more vulnerable than those under 40, with the highest risk in those over 60 years old. People with weakened immune systems or conditions such as diabetes, heart and lung disease are also more vulnerable to serious illness.

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<sup>1</sup>[https://www.who.int/docs/default-source/coronaviruse/getting-workplace-ready-for-covid-19.pdf?sfvrsn=359a81e7\\_6](https://www.who.int/docs/default-source/coronaviruse/getting-workplace-ready-for-covid-19.pdf?sfvrsn=359a81e7_6)

This document has been developed to provide advice to staff on:

- Simple ways to prevent the spread of COVID-19 in the workplace
- Organizing meetings or events in the current regional COVID-19 climate
- What to consider when travelling
- What happens if COVID-19 is diagnosed in the workplace

## 1. Simple ways to prevent the spread of COVID-19 in the workplace

The low-cost measures below will help prevent the spread of COVID-19 in the workplace and so protect ECOWAS staff, visitors and partners

- All workplaces must be kept clean and hygienic:
  - Surfaces (e.g. desks and tables) and objects (e.g. telephones, keyboards) need to be wiped with disinfectant regularly;
  - *Why? Because contamination on surfaces touched by staff and visitors is one of the main ways that COVID-19 spreads*
- All Staff and visitors must practice regular and thorough hand-washing and/or cleaning:
  - Departments and all units must install dispensers for alcohol hand sanitizers in prominent places, and ensure the dispensers are regularly refilled;
  - Departments and all units must display posters promoting hand-washing;
  - Mobile hand washing facilities will be placed at all entry points for staff and visitors to wash their hands with soap and water on entry and exit to all ECOWAS facilities
  - *Why? Because washing kills the virus on your hands and prevents the spread of COVID-19*
- Practice good respiratory hygiene in the workplace
  - When sneezing or coughing, staff must do so into the elbow or into a tissue, must throw away the tissue into a closed bin and then wash hands thoroughly with soap and water
  - Any staff who develops constant sneezing or runny nose at work must wear a face mask immediately, and contact the COVID-19 hotline provided for advice
  - Any staff who develops COVID-19 like symptoms (fever, cough, shortness of breath) at work must immediately leave work, wear a mask and contact the national COVID-19 hotline for advice.
  - *Why? Because good respiratory hygiene prevents the spread of COVID-19*
- Advise employees and contractors to consult national travel advice before going on business trips.
- Heads of Institutions, Commissioners, and Directors should encourage home working by staff:
  - Anyone with even a mild cough or low-grade fever (37.3 C or more) needs to stay at home and self-isolate. Staff should also stay home and work from

home if they have had to take simple medications, such as paracetamol, ibuprofen or aspirin, which may mask symptoms of infection.

- Staff should self-isolate and work from home if they feel they may have come in contact with a COVID-19 patient but such staff must comply with the provisions for home-working in the earlier Directive issued by the ECOWAS President.
- Any staff that has to take time off but cannot work from home in line with the earlier Directive are allowed to count the time off as sick leave.

## **2. Organizing meetings or events in the current regional COVID-19 climate**

There is a risk that people attending meetings or events might be unwittingly bringing the COVID-19 virus to the gathering, particularly as some people are infectious without having any symptoms. Others might therefore be unknowingly exposed to COVID-19.

Therefore until further notice

- ALL international meetings should be cancelled or postponed
- Only internal meetings of ECOWAS involving less than 50 people are allowed
- All ECOWAS Sites must identify a room or area where someone who becomes unwell at work or develops COVID-19 like symptoms can be safely isolated;
- All ECOWAS Sites must have a plan for transferring staff safely to a health facility

BEFORE the internal meeting or event

- Consider whether a face-to-face meeting or event is needed. Could it be replaced by a teleconference or online event?
- Could the meeting or event be scaled down so that fewer people attend?
- Sufficient personal hygiene supplies and materials, including tissues and hand sanitizer for all participants should be pre-ordered. Surgical masks must be made available to offer anyone who develops respiratory symptoms during the meeting.
- Staff should NOT attend any meeting if they have any symptoms or feel unwell, and meeting invitations must emphasize this to all participants in advance
- Attendance list with all contact details is MANDATORY. Participants' details will be shared with local public health authorities if any participant becomes ill with a suspected COVID-19.

DURING the meeting or event

- The principles of self-distancing and personal respiratory hygiene should be emphasized at the start of the meeting. One example could be to use an ice breaker that demonstrates how to say Hello without touching.
- Alcohol-based hand sanitizers should be displayed prominently around the venue
- Seats should be arranged so that participants are at least 1.5 meters apart
- The venue should be well ventilated with windows and doors opened
- Activate the preparedness plan and contact the local COVID-19 hotline should anyone take ill during the meeting

AFTER the meeting or event:

- Attendance lists with contact details of all participants should be retained for at least one month. This will help public health authorities trace people who may have been exposed to COVID-19 if one or more participants become ill shortly after
- Remind all participants to report to the meeting organizers if they were to develop any symptoms within 14 days after the meeting
- Remind Staff of the dedicated ECOWAS Covid-19 Hotline

### **3. What to consider when travelling**

As previously directed, all missions and international travel are currently suspended, except for critical reasons in exceptional circumstances approved by the ECOWAS President or Head of Institution. The latest information on COVID-19 global spread is available at

<https://www.who.int/emergencies/diseases/novel-coronavirus-2019/situation-reports/>

Staff that are at higher risk of COVID-19 should avoid any travel and should practice social distancing at all times – those over 60 years, those with depressed immunity, or those with medical conditions such as diabetes, heart and lung disease.

All Staff who have to travel should purchase small bottles (under 100 CL) of alcohol-based hand sanitizers and carry them on their person at all times to facilitate regular hand hygiene.

While traveling, Staff should wash hands regularly, stay at least 1.5 meters away from people who are coughing or sneezing, and comply with instructions from local authorities regarding COVID-19 restrictions.

Staff returning from any area of high burden of COVID-19 should self-isolate for 14 days and monitor themselves for symptoms

All Staff should note down the relevant COVID-19 hotline telephone number of their ECOWAS Institutions (each ECOWAS Institution has been instructed to establish a telephone number to guide the local staff).

### **4. What happens if COVID-19 is diagnosed in the Workplace**

Since the diagnosis of COVID-19 involves a laboratory test, it is unlikely that any person will be diagnosed with COVID-19 in the workplace. However, staff may develop the typical symptoms of COVID-19 (fever, dry cough and/or difficulty breathing) and therefore require immediate isolation, preliminary care and transfer to a health facility. To address this possibility:

- All ECOWAS Sites have been advised to identify a room or area where someone who becomes unwell at work or develops COVID-19 like symptoms can be safely isolated before contacting the local health authorities

- All ECOWAS Sites have been advised to have a plan for transferring the staff to a health facility using a car or ambulance with the staff sitting on the back seat at least 1.5 meters from the driver, both staff and driver wearing masks, and all windows left open for maximal ventilation. The Plan must be cleared beforehand with the local authorities
- Any Staff who becomes ill with suspected COVID-19 whilst at work must immediately contact the dedicated hotline number of the ECOWAS Commission or their Institution
- Staff must not be stigmatized or discriminated against for reporting symptoms whether the tests for COVID-19 turn out positive or negative
- All ECOWAS Sites have been advised to encourage teleworking and more homeworking
- An Inter-Institutional Committee is being set up to develop a Contingency and Business Continuity plan for the whole ECOWAS Community in order to address plans for the organization to maintain operations should the region become overwhelmed with confirmed cases of COVID-19. Staff will be updated on this in due course.

### **In Conclusion:**

COVID-19 is here in the ECOWAS Region, but more important now than ever is that Staff must NOT panic, rather they should be vigilant, practice social distancing, personal and respiratory hygiene etiquette, and conduct themselves professionally. ECOWAS will make available all resources where possible to support staff in the above and will regularly update advice for staff to protect themselves and their loved ones.