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Department of Administrative Services
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Human Resources Administration

Contagious Illness in the Workplace

This advisory addresses issues concerning contagious illness in the workplace.

What illnesses of are concern?

The Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) is closely monitoring a novel coronavirus, COVID-19, identified as the cause of an outbreak of respiratory illness first detected in Wuhan, China. The CDC indicates that imported cases of COVID-19 infection in travelers have been detected in the U.S., and that person-to-person spread of COVID-19 also has been seen among close contacts of returned travelers from Wuhan. At this time, however, this virus is NOT currently spreading in the community in the United States.

The Georgia Department of Public Health (DPH) indicates that the overall risk of novel coronavirus to the general public is low, and symptoms may resemble the seasonal flu, which is a far greater risk this time of year. DPH has not confirmed any COVID-19 cases in Georgia to date; however, this is an emerging, rapidly evolving situation.

What can employers and employees do to prevent the spread of illness?

According to the CDC and DPH, the best way to prevent infection with any respiratory virus is to use the same preventive strategies used during a normal cold and flu season:

your nose, coughing, or sneezing.

- If soap and water are not readily available, use an alcohol-based hand sanitizer with at least 60% alcohol. Always wash hands with soap and water if hands are visibly dirty.
- Avoid touching your eyes, nose, and mouth with unwashed hands.
- Avoid close contact with people who are sick.
- Stay home when experiencing symptoms of illness. Symptoms of coronavirus can include fever, cough, and shortness of breath.
- Cover your cough or sneeze with a tissue, then throw the tissue in the trash.
- Clean and disinfect frequently touched objects and surfaces using a regular household cleaning spray or wipe.
- Get a flu shot.

The CDC does not recommend that people who are well wear face masks to protect themselves from respiratory viruses, including COVID-19. Face masks should be used by people who show symptoms of COVID-19, in order to protect others from the risk of getting infected. The use of face masks is also crucial for health workers and people who are taking care of someone in close settings (at home or in a health care facility).

Persons who experience fever, cough, or difficulty breathing and have traveled to China or were in close contact with someone with COVID-19 in the l4 days before experiencing symptoms should seek immediate medical care.

The CDC further recommends that employers should "**actively encourage sick employees to stay at home**." More specific recommendations are as follows:

- Employees who have symptoms of acute respiratory illness are recommended to stay home and not come to work until they are free of fever (100.4° F [37.8° C] or greater using an oral thermometer), signs of a fever, and any other symptoms for at least 24 hours, without the use of fever-reducing or other symptom-altering medicines (e.g. cough suppressants).
- Employees should notify their supervisor and stay home if they are sick.

these policies.

- Employers should talk with companies that provide contract or temporary employees about the importance of sick employees staying home and encourage them to develop non-punitive leave policies.
- Employers, when requesting supporting documentation to validate the illness or return to work of an employee who has an acute respiratory illness, should be aware that healthcare provider offices and medical facilities may be extremely busy and not able to provide the requested documentation in a timely manner.
- Employers should maintain flexible policies that permit employees to stay home to care for a sick family member. Employers should be aware that more employees may need to stay at home to care for sick children or other sick family members than is usual.

The CDC also advises that employees who appear to have acute respiratory illness symptoms (i.e., cough, shortness of breath) upon arrival to work or become sick during the day should be separated from other employees and be sent home immediately.

Is coronavirus an ADA concern?

Although an argument might be made that an upper-respiratory virus such as COVID-19 meets the ADA's definition of a "disability" because the illness limits the major life function of breathing, the fact that the coronavirus is a temporary condition weakens that argument. Nevertheless, employers should not make assumptions about any employee's illness or other health condition because of the risk of generating a "regarded as" claim under the ADA.

HRA will monitor this situation and provide further updates as necessary. Further information on COVID-19 can also be found on the websites for the CDC and DPH.

If you have questions about the information in this advisory, please contact the HRA helpdesk at 404-656-2705 or 1-877-318-2772 or a member of the HRA Policy team.

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