COVID-19 Outbreaks in Meat Factories in Ireland Outbreak Control Team

Interim Guidance on COVID-19

The following advice is based on best practice available to us currently. As Covid-19 is a new illness with an evolving scientific evidence base, it is likely that some of the advice in this letter will be superseded in the coming weeks and months. Therefore, this is interim guidance.

The overall objective of the advice is to:

1. prevent first cases entering plants,
2. prevent spread within plants,
3. prevent spread in the wider community (including spread to vulnerable people),
4. reduce impacts on output and production of plants in an important food industry

The advice comes under four broad headings:

1. **Infection prevention and control measures which should always be in place in order to prevent cases and control outbreaks** – at the entry site, throughout the facility, in the canteen, in the production areas, in the locker room and toilets, and in the office.
2. **Steps to be taken when an individual case is suspected or confirmed**
3. **Additional steps to be taken when an outbreak has occurred**
4. **Factors external to the working environment**

It is now advisable for all plants to review all systems, review all Standard Operating Procedures and consider touring the plant with DAFM staff and environmental health professionals to check that all advice is being properly implemented.

Contracting of occupational health services and translation services should be considered to ensure that health and communication needs of employees can be easily met.

Movement of staff between establishments including factory workers, canteen staff (if contract caterers), cleaning staff or veterinary staff should be avoided.
Infection prevention and control measures within the factory which should always be in place in order to prevent cases and control outbreaks

**Entry Site**

1. Have a permanent screening station at the point of entry into the workplace for every employee. This should include a screening questionnaire for symptoms, completed by a manager, and a staff temperature check. Staff should be sent home if they fail either the screening questionnaire or screening temperature check i.e. if they have symptoms or a temperature higher than 37.5°C. You may need professional occupational health assistance with this.
2. Hand washing facilities\(^1\) or alcohol-based hand gel should be available at the entry site.
3. Ensure social distancing of 2 metres while awaiting entry screening.
4. Starting times should be staggered, for example at 15 minute intervals, to ensure social distancing while waiting for screening. In some facilities with multiple operations (e.g. slaughtering / cutting / cooking) different business units can be started at different times.
5. Screening, hand hygiene and social distancing also applies to all hauliers and contractors.
6. Ensure hauliers and contractors do not mix with staff on site. Preferably they should have separate entrances and gates.
7. All unnecessary visits to site should be cancelled.
8. Screening at entry site should be supervised by Occupational Health or by a suitable dedicated trained individual.

**Throughout the facility**

1. Hand washing facilities with hot and cold running water, soap and hand drying facilities should be provided. Disposable paper towels should be used for hand drying. Hand Hygiene should take place on entry to the facility, on breaks and before moving through the plant. Supervision may be required and queues should be avoided. Additional units may need to be installed.
2. Alcohol-based hand gel (minimum 60%) should be available throughout factory. They should be place at frequent intervals throughout the plant and be sufficient in number to avoid queues. These should be checked regularly to ensure that they do not become empty.
3. Social distancing of 2 metres between workers must be facilitated, both alongside each other and face to face. If belts are narrower than 2 meters, face-to-face working should be avoided. Avoid shoulder to shoulder working. This includes:
   a. in smoking areas and corridors.
   b. on the production line – including Food Business operator staff, DAFM employees and contractors.
   c. in the canteen (or during other breaks)

\(^1\) Hand washing instructions can be found on the [HSE website](https://www.hse.gov.uk) and handwashing facilities should be of a standard to permit handwashing to this level.
d. in the locker room and toilets  
e. on entering and exiting the factory  
f. in offices

4. Ensure all staff wear masks and goggles or visors. Ensure they know and use the correct technique for putting them on and taking them off and that they know how to clean and / or dispose of them.

5. A policy of respiratory etiquette must apply at all times – coughing into a tissue and binning it immediately or coughing into the elbow. Infographics or posters in appropriate languages should be displayed throughout the factory. Anyone coughing or with other symptoms of COVID-19 symptoms should be excluded from work.

### Canteen

1. Hand washing facilities should be available at the entrance to the canteen and should be supervised.

2. Break times should be staggered to ensure no overcrowding so that social distancing can be implemented.

3. Social distancing should be enforced by management.

4. Queue points on the floor should be clearly marked to ensure physical distancing.

5. Consider erecting a marquee as extra canteen space to ensure physical distancing.

6. Consider small standing only tables to reduce time spent and the numbers of people at any one table and to avoid chairs becoming vehicles of transmission. Alternatively, provide tables with just one chair.

7. There should be no sharing of food and drink such as drink bottles or bags of crisps.

8. The frequency of cleaning and sanitising in all common areas, most especially hand touch surfaces, such as tables tops, drinks levers, keypads, grab-rails, elevator buttons, light switches, door handles, delph and cutlery, and any surface or item which is designed to be, or has a high likelihood of being touched by hands, should be increased. The chemicals used must be verified as being effective against viruses and the correct contact times must also be adhered to. Cleaning should take place using a detergent followed by a disinfectant solution with anti-viral properties, such as a chlorine-based disinfectant to a concentration of 1/ 1000 free chlorine, or equivalent.

9. A system to reduce the use of cash for food or the exclusive use of debit cards should be considered. For example, one option that could be used, where a plant accepts cash only once per day per person for all meals by a designated staff member. Alternatively, the company could provide food free of charge.

10. In so far as possible food should be individually wrapped to further avoid any contamination

11. Where possible, pods of workers should be matched to zoned canteen areas (see below for description of pod working).
12. Canteen Food workers should have separate changing rooms and toilets.

13. All doors and windows (subject to appropriate fly screening) in the canteen should remain open to allow greater air exchange and prevent touching of window handles.

14. The Environmental Health Service of the HSE is available to review canteen and food operations.

**Production:**

1. Production levels should be set at a level that allows physical distancing to be put in place.

2. If 2 metres of space between work stations cannot be attained, Perspex screens should be installed between each person. They should be cleaned at the end of every shift. Staff in the production area should wear facial visors. Each plant should develop a training module so that staff are trained how to correctly put on and take off this personal protective equipment (PPE), as this is the time when contamination is most likely. There must be appropriate cleaning and disposal of this equipment.

3. Start times should be staggered to allow for social distancing.

4. The number of workers per shift should be reduced as much as possible.

5. There should be a break in the time between the end of one shift and the start of another to ensure physical distancing and effecting cleaning of working area surfaces (i.e. Perspex screens etc).

6. The frequency of sanitising and fogging should be reviewed and increased where possible.

7. Notice boards and television units should display information on COVID-19, particularly on hand-hygiene, physical distancing and respiratory etiquette. Infographics should be used where possible. If infographics are not used, communication material should be made widely available in all of the languages of the workforce.

8. TV screen guidance on the following should be developed (HSE can help):
   
   a. People positive with COVID-19 must isolate for 14 days. If isolation is insufficient, contacts of that case may have to isolate for significantly longer
   
   b. Contacts of case will be excluded from work for 14 days*
   
   c. Information on City West Hotel as an isolation facility
   
   d. Avoiding car-pooling outside of household members.

   *Please note exclusion from work can be theoretically up to 28 days for family and housemates e.g. if a case does not fully isolate in the home for 14 days as advised.

**Office:**

1. Office staff should work from home where possible.

2. Meetings should take place by teleconference or online.

3. COVID-19-specific management meetings should be put in place and occur regularly.
4. All PC screens, keyboards, mouse etc throughout the plant should be cleaned regularly.

A pod approach:

1. Workers should be organised into pods or groups, where possible. Pods work together, take their breaks together, change together and as far as possible even travel to work together. If one person then becomes a suspected or confirmed case only members of their pod are contacts and the pod can be excluded together. This will allow the appropriate skill mix to always be available and facilitate the smoother running of the facility preventing key workers being excluded together.

2. Workers travelling in pods should wear face masks and wash their hands before and after travelling together. Where possible, the canteen should be split into zones and specific zones then assigned to specific pods in the production area. Break times and subsequent cleaning should be staggered along zone / pod lines.

 Locker room and toilets:

1. Systematic, frequent and effective cleaning of locker rooms and toilets should be documented, implemented and verified. Again, most emphasis should be on hand touch surfaces. Transmission is as likely to occur here as anywhere else in the factory with a higher risk at the start and end of each shift.

2. If physical distancing is not possible in the locker room, consider more space e.g. erecting temporary or tent or prefabricated additional space.

3. Consider providing a portable WC outside so that staff do not need to go through a locker room, queue for toilets or stand side by side at a urinal. Such a portable WC should be included in a cleaning programme with frequent cleaning.

4. Assigns staff to ensure employees stay no longer than 15 minutes in locker room or toilets and to monitor locker rooms to ensure physical distancing.

5. Standard Operating Procedures for cleaning locker rooms and toilets should be in place.

Further cleaning:

1. The frequency and effectiveness of standard fogging in the production rooms, toilets, locker rooms, and PPE stores should be reviewed and increased if necessary.

2. All touch points should be cleaned at least once per hour.

3. All employed or contracted cleaning staff should be trained in the correct use of the cleaning materials, abide by rules of where protective clothing is worn and where it is not worn. Additional staff or replacement staff should also be properly trained in cleaning techniques and know the cleaning SOPs thoroughly.
Steps to be taken when an individual case of COVID-19 is suspected or confirmed

1. Any staff member who fails the screening questionnaire or temperature check on entry to the facility should be sent home and advised to contact their GP or occupational health doctor for testing.

2. Any staff member who develops symptoms while at work should be immediately isolated, sent home and advised to contact their GP for testing.

3. There should be a designated isolation room onsite for symptomatic staff. This should be cleaned after a suspected or confirmed case leaves. Masks should be provided for a person using this room.

4. Confirmed and suspected cases and their household and travel contacts should be actively excluded from work for the appropriate time:
   a. **Confirmed cases**: 14 days from onset of symptoms, the last 5 of which should be fever free or 14 days from the date of swab for a person who has experienced no symptoms
   b. **Suspected case**: 14 days from onset of symptoms, for review when the swab result is available
   c. **Close contact**: 14 days from the last day of contact with a confirmed case, occurring during the infectious period of the confirmed case.

5. The distinction between self-isolation for cases and all that it involves and restricting movements for close contacts should be explained to employees and their understanding should be confirmed. Leaflets to explain these differences are available on the HPSC website in different languages Portuguese, Polish and Russian (https://www.hpsc.ie/a-z/respiratory/coronavirus/novelcoronavirus/factsheetsandresources/covid-19translatedresources/).

6. It is important to note that for a family who is self-isolating together that the 14 days for a close contact starts on the last day of their contact with a case, while the case is infectious. For a working person, who is a close contact of a confirmed family case or housemate or travel companion, this can mean up to 28 days restricted movement and not working for all of this time. This is why it is very important for cases to self-isolate immediately and effectively.

7. Exclusion of cases, suspected cases and close contacts is complicated and should be overseen by an Occupational Health clinical service. This can be contracted out if such a service is not already available to you.

8. Self-isolation at home is not recommended if vulnerable people such as those with chronic medical conditions, those who are elderly or immunocompromised also reside in the same house or apartment.

9. Cases who are able to self-care should be offered a place in the State’s isolation facilities, currently the City West Hotel, so that they can self-isolate away from family and unaffected housemates.
10. High risk and vulnerable people e.g. those who are immunocompromised or pregnant or have a chronic underlying condition, should be excluded from the workplace after a risk assessment.

11. It is really important that staff understand their illness benefits. Assistance should be provided to staff, by HR, to make sure they know and understand how to access payments.

12. A fitness to work certificate is required from Occupational Health or the employee’s GP prior to them returning to work after self-isolation and after exclusion for any reason.

13. There should be an on the spot return to work interview following any absences, whether the reasons for the absence are known or not.

14. A single point of contact from senior management should be arranged for liaising with relevant agencies during the investigation of the case.
Additional steps to be taken when an outbreak has occurred

1. An outbreak of COVID-19 is when two or more cases of the disease are linked by time, place or person. There must be a high index of suspicion of an outbreak even if there is only one case in a plant. Contact your local Public Health Department (see enclosed) if you think there is a problem.

2. Infection Prevention and Control measures and the steps taken in response to an individual case of COVID-19 should continue to be strictly followed during an outbreak.

3. There should be a designated manager / HR staff member to liaise with staff on COVID-19 issues and liaise directly with the local Public Health Department for advice and support during an outbreak.

4. The employer should keep an up-to-date log of all employees in the workplace with contact numbers and addresses. This list will enable mass testing if it is required.

5. The employer should give some consideration, in advance, as to how mass testing of the entire staff could be achieved if indicated. This can ultimately be planned in collaboration with HSE testing staff and Public Health.

6. The employer should also know who are every employee’s close contacts while at work, during travel to work and at home, so that they can be identified and excluded as close contacts and tested if indicated. The pod system, previously described, may be useful here.

7. Where possible, they should also know which employees live together, so that close contacts can be identified and excluded and tested if indicated.

8. Ensure staff are made aware of the outbreak, including Dept of Agriculture staff and contractors that go on site.

9. An occupational health service should be engaged to help respond to an outbreak.

10. In the event of a sufficiently extensive outbreak, that risks leading to widespread infection amongst staff with community transmission, consideration should be given to temporary closure of the plant. However, prior to this decision there should be clear agreed criteria for re-opening.

11. Management should ensure that all workers are aware of the necessity to have a General Practitioner.
Engagement and communication with staff

1. Continuous, effective communication to all staff is vital.
2. Initiating communication before there is a case or an outbreak will help with control of an outbreak if it occurs.
3. English may not be the first language of many workers and some may not fully understand the national, personal and population imperatives to control COVID-19.
4. Ensure all messages are communicated in the employee’s primary language.
5. Use infographics interchangeably with communication in the range of languages spoken by the workers.
6. Use translators as necessary.
7. Identify key leaders / staff representatives in the various worker communities that can reinforce messaging.
8. Put up posters and display TV screens with HSE COVID-19 information in all the relevant languages, throughout the factory.
9. An emphasis should be put on;
   - reporting any symptoms, even minor ones
   - not working while ill
   - if symptoms develop, going home, isolating and getting tested
   - if confirmed as a case, self-isolation must be effective
   - the potentially long restricted movement time for close contacts if the case does not effectively isolate
   - the mechanism for receiving illness benefits or the Government COVID-19 payment
10. Cases who are able to self-care should be offered a place in the State’s isolation facilities, currently City West, so that they can self-isolate away from family. This may not be perceived well by workers. It should be understood that this facility is available to everyone in Ireland who is a case who cannot self-isolate successfully in their home. People avail of it for a variety of reasons including worry about specific family member who may be vulnerable or where they realise that their families 14 days restricted movement starts on the last day of contact with them while they are infectious – which can be up to one month for other family members. A vast range of people from all walks of life and all socio-economic backgrounds have availed of this facility. It is comfortable 4* accommodation, meals are provided, there is medical supervision on site, transport will be arranged and there is no cost.
Factors external to the working environment

Living conditions

1. Every effort should be made to ensure workers can maintain social distancing in every setting and isolation when required. For more advice see: https://www2.hse.ie/conditions/coronavirus/protect-yourself-and-others.html

2. Some Isolation facilities are available for cases who can self-care e.g. City West. For more information see: https://www2.hse.ie/services/coronavirus-self-isolation-facilities/

Travelling to work

1. Social distancing should be maintained on transport while travelling to work

2. Those who walk to work should be strongly encouraged to social distance at 2 metres while doing so.

Financial Support for workers

Further information available from the Department of Employment Affairs and Social Protection: https://services.mywelfare.ie/en/topics/covid-19-payments/