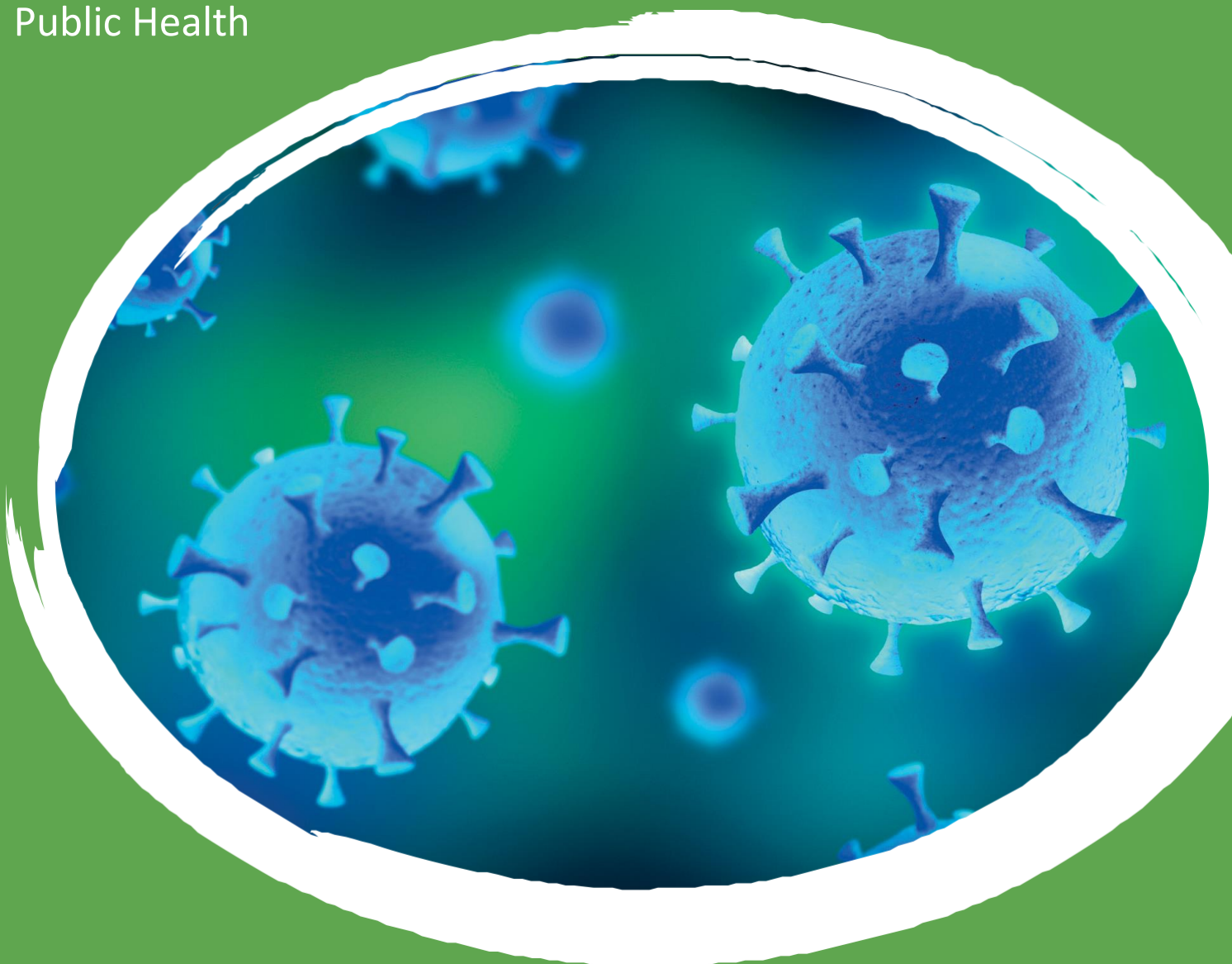


Employee health and wellbeing during COVID-19

A toolkit for employers

August 2020

Public Health



www.milton-keynes.gov.uk/health-and-wellbeing-hub/work-well-mk

Working together to improve the health and wellbeing of our communities

Public Health Workplace Health Team



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Introduction

The greatest asset any organisation has is its employees and at this time of uncertainty every organisation will need the support of its workforce to secure its future.

The COVID-19 pandemic has had a negative impact on the mental and physical health of employees. Now more than ever, employers must fulfil their fundamental duty of care to promote staff health and wellbeing, to give businesses the best opportunity for a full and sustained recovery.

Why a toolkit?

The Public Health team, working across Milton Keynes, Bedford Borough and Central Bedfordshire planned a launch event for the new [Healthy Workplace Award scheme](#). The Award scheme provides employers in Milton Keynes, Central Bedfordshire and Bedford Borough with a consistent measure of workplace health. It covers eight core standards and sets out different requirements for small, medium and large businesses. The Healthy Workplace Award Scheme invites employers to take a flexible, honest appraisal of how their organisation is performing, starting at Bronze level and overtime progressing through to Gold. The free Healthy Workplace Award Scheme is independently accredited which can have a profound impact, paying dividends for employers and employees alike. Although the launch event for the award scheme has been postponed due to the pandemic, [registration](#) for the scheme is open.

With an increased emphasis on the need for employee health and wellbeing, this toolkit aims to provide employers with evidence informed guidance and information to enable them to support the health and wellbeing of their workforce, throughout the restoration phase and beyond. It is based on the 8 standards of the Healthy Workplace Awards:



Leadership

The COVID-19 pandemic challenges leaders to reset their businesses and prepare for an uncertain future. The following principles may help employers to lead the way towards a new normal:

- Prepare by getting the basics right first –take time to set up, to be as effective and as positive as possible. This includes a positive mind set and ensuring personal wellbeing.
- Connect – leaders should be supportive and be supported. Adopt a people first response and lead by example.
- Lead in an agile way to navigate changing needs and priorities. Prioritise, experiment, evaluate, communicate and re-evaluate.

What employers can do

- It is important, even at a time of heightened stress and anxiety that employers lead with empathy, honesty and compassion. Employers will be most effective in leading the change if they take time to know their employees and engage with them. Some employees may face personal, domestic, financial or health related difficulties. Wherever possible, employers should consider ways to support employees to mitigate against these by creating a culture of openness.
- If employees are working from home, communication is key. Regularly check-in with employees and make time for connection to help people feel safe to talk openly. Consider ways in which teams can stay in contact with one another to get them talking and feeling connected about something other than work. Use different means of communication such as phone and video calling to avoid employees feeling bogged down by emails and instant messages.
- To facilitate a return to the workplace, employers may need to consider adjusting work patters or work roles to support colleagues facing challenges. A re-orientation or re-induction process for returning staff may need to be considered. Employers can also support by signposting to reliable information and resources to help them manage individual challenges.

The COVID-19 pandemic will have an impact on unemployment rates, which will have a resulting economic and social impact on population health. Employers have an opportunity to look at supply chains in terms of goods and services. As businesses start to reshape services and hence our workforce needs, there is an opportunity to create job roles that local people can do to address workforce challenges and improve population health.

Please refer to the following document for further information:

[Guidance for employers - returning to work insert new link](#)

Leadership information and resources

The Government has published extensive guidance on [support for businesses](#), including advice on funding and support, responsibilities of employers, and how to run businesses safely.

A GOV.UK [service](#) to find out what help is available if affected by coronavirus, including feeling unsafe, going in to work, paying bills or being unemployed, getting food, having somewhere to live and mental health and wellbeing.

The Public Health Workplace Health Team have produced a suite of [guidance documents](#) to support employee health and wellbeing during COVID- 19 including advice on working from home.



Attendance Management

COVID-19 is having an unprecedented effect on working life and in particular, has led to high rates of absenteeism among staff. If an employee cannot attend work due to sickness, they are usually required to inform their line manager before they are due to start work (or as soon as possible if this is not practical) and provide medical evidence (eg a sick note from their doctor) for sickness of more than 7 days. In light of the coronavirus (COVID-19) pandemic, employees should not attend work and follow the [Government's guidance on self-isolation](#) if they or anyone they live with develops symptoms of the virus.

What employers can do

- Provide advice and reassurance to employees about the arrangements for sick pay. Employees on zero contract hours may be reluctant to take time off for sickness. Ensure they feel supported and are signposted to local financial or food support if required.
- Maintain open lines of communication particularly with staff that are working from home and encourage them to report as soon as they believe they may be sick. Employees who are COVID positive and isolating should also be supported.
- Ensure employees' contact details are up to date in the event that you need to reach them while they are in self-isolation.
- Maintain the privacy of employees with confirmed or suspected COVID-19 infection.
- Carry out return to work interviews to understand current needs anxieties and vulnerabilities. Carry out specific risk assessments for individuals to take into account a person's health status and make reasonable adjustments.
- Encourage employees to take time off as they would usually do and communicate openly with staff if leave patterns need to change due to changing business demands. If the current situation prevents employees from taking their annual leave during the relevant holiday year, you could agree to employees taking leave later.

Attendance management information and resources

[Guidance](#) on the management of suspected and confirmed cases of Coronavirus in the workplace

Health and Safety

Employers are required by law to protect employees, and others, from harm. They must have taken the necessary steps to become COVID-19 secure in line with the current Health and Safety legislation. Under the Management of Health and Safety at Work Regulations 1999, the minimum you must do is:

- identify what could cause injury or illness in your business (hazards)
- decide how likely it is that someone could be harmed and how seriously (the risk)
- take action to eliminate the hazard, or if this isn't possible, control the risk

What employers can do

- Continue to follow health and safety workplace guidance for their sector such as making every reasonable effort to enable working from home as a first option.
- Carry out a COVID-19 risk assessment. If you have fewer than five employees, employers do not have to write anything down, but doing so might be helpful when communicating the risks to employees. Consideration of the most vulnerable workers as outlined in the guidance document [here](#).
- Develop cleaning, handwashing and hygiene procedures including encouraging people to follow the guidance on hand washing and hygiene; providing hand sanitiser, hand wash and drying facilities around the workplace; frequently cleaning and disinfecting objects and surfaces that are touched regularly and enhancing cleaning for busy areas.
- Help people to work from home by ensuring they have the right equipment and are able and willing to do so. Be aware of the needs of staff that may have difficulty working from home. Ensure Display Screen Equipment (DSE) [checklists](#) are carried out and respond to any need for adjustments or provision of equipment.
- Maintain social distancing, where possible by putting up signs to remind workers and visitors of social distancing guidance (please see link to free posters and workplace markings below); avoiding sharing workstations; arranging one-way traffic through the workplace if possible; switching to seeing visitors by appointment only if possible.
- Where people cannot social distance, manage transmission risk by considering whether an activity needs to continue for the business to operate; keeping the activity time involved as short as possible; using screens or barriers to separate people from each other; using back-to-back or side-to-side working whenever possible; staggering arrival and departure times; reducing the number of people each person has contact with by using 'fixed teams or partnering' or using Personal Protective Equipment (PPE) if required.
- Guidance on the management of suspected or confirmed cases of COVID-19 in the workplace is [here](#) Ensure any cases of, or deaths from, COVID-19 applying only to occupational exposure, that is, as a result of a person's work are reported under [RIDDOR](#)

Health and safety information and resources

Guidance to help employers, employees and the self-employed [understand how to work safely during the coronavirus pandemic](#).

Coronavirus (COVID-19): latest information and advice from the [Health and Safety Executive](#) (HSE)

Guidance and examples of [risk assessments during COVID -19](#) for various work settings, provided by the HSE.

Government guidance on the [5 steps to working safely](#) during Coronavirus.

Display Screen Equipment [workstation checklist and guidance](#).

HSE [guide to working safely during coronavirus](#)

Guidance for [shops on working safely](#)

Government guidance on [cleaning in non healthcare settings](#).

The NHS Test and Trace [workplace guidance](#).

Milton Keynes Environmental Health are able to provide advice and guidance on workplace health and safety <https://www.milton-keynes.gov.uk/environmental-health-and-trading-standards/coronavirus-c-19> .

To report a case of COVID-19 in the workplace please see guidance [here](#)

National advice if a confirmed case of COVID-19 has occurred in your business or organisation, go to the [reporting an outbreak resource site](#) to find the relevant type of organisation and follow the instructions on the action card

[Bedford Borough Council](#) and [Central Bedfordshire Council](#) business webpages provide information and advice on Coronavirus CBC for businesses.

Workplace premises [Coronavirus signage](#) available free from Milton Keynes Council.

Mental Health

Indications suggest that the pandemic, and measures taken by government to control it such as lockdown and social distancing, will have a significant impact upon the mental health of employees. It is very possible that these mental health implications will be felt for many months and even years

At a time where fear and anxiety is already heightened, it's important to consider how to best manage the psychological impact COVID-19 could be having on the workforce. The pandemic has had an unequal impact across the workforce, as different groups of employees, and individuals, will have been affected in diverse ways according to their job role and individual circumstances.

Domestic abuse:

The consequences of domestic abuse include mental, emotional, physical, social and financial impacting the individual survivor, their family and children. It is important to consider that although the majority of victims are women, men can also be victims of domestic abuse. Where employers are aware of team members suffering from domestic abuse, they may consider that the normal place of work is a safer environment for the employee and give priority to them attending the workplace over other team members. Government advice on Domestic Abuse relating to Coronavirus can be found below.

Stress:

Stress has for many years been one of the top three reasons for sickness absence nationally with 23% (HR: 2017-2018) of the workforce citing this as a reason to be unable to work. However due to the pandemic, many people's personal and working lives have become incredibly stressful, uncertain and challenging.

Stress may affect every aspect of an employee's life from personal relationships, finances, job insecurity and balancing home and work life.

Sleep:

[Sleep deprivation](#) can have profound consequences on physical and mental health. A [new study](#) by King's College London and Ipsos MORI has found that significant numbers have experienced changes to their sleep patterns since the coronavirus lockdown was announced. The researchers report that lack of sleep may itself have knock-on effects on people's capacity to be resilient during the pandemic, and there are signs of a disproportionate impact on particular groups: women, younger people and those facing financial difficulties.

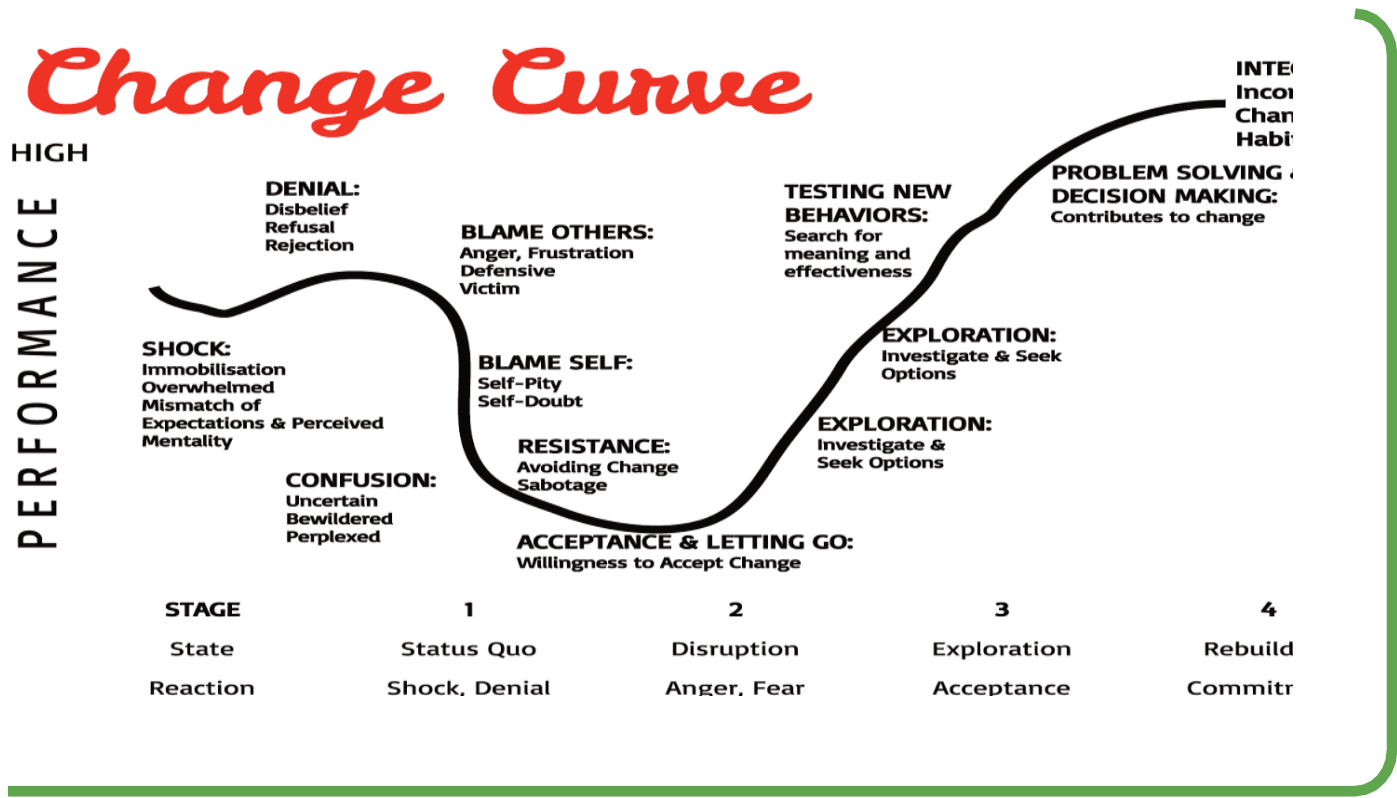
Common anxieties during COVID-19:

- Uncertainty over finances
- Fear of job loss
- Fear of homelessness
- Whether adequate measures have been taken to protect staff safety and the associated fear of catching COVID-19 at work
- Not being able to care for vulnerable friends
- Caring for school aged children
- Leaving pets which have become accustomed usual to company
- Returning to work and the fear of catching the virus
- Loneliness through social distancing
- experiencing domestic abuse
- Lack of sleep
- Negativity from colleagues who have been furloughed and feelings of guilt for those remaining in work
- Bereavement and trauma from the loss of loved and family ones, the experience of being ill or the upheaval of their routines and lives.
- Personal vulnerabilities including, health conditions, gender, ethnic origin and age
- An inability to cope with change

Employers may find it helpful to consider the following model to understand and support employees through this rapid period of change.

The Kubler-Ross change curve

The Change Curve is a popular and powerful model used to understand the stages of personal transition and organisational change. It helps to predict how people will react to change, so they can be helped and supported to make their own personal transitions.



What employers can do

- **Understand employees' needs**
Stress affects us all at different times and in different ways. Remain alert for changes in staff wellbeing, including signs of emerging mental wellbeing challenges, domestic abuse and sleep deprivation experienced during COVID-19. Managers need to feel confident and be empowered to intervene when necessary and to open a discussion and approach the subject with compassion.
- **Engage employees**
Increase confidence by involving staff in decisions to plan for the future. Communicate often and clearly to explain what has been decided including what steps have been taken to ensure their safety if they are returning to the workplace. If some individuals remain anxious, encourage them back in a phased return.
- **Support employees**
Be aware of and promote local and national sources of information and support according to need (see below for resources). Signpost employees to in house support services, such as Occupational Health or Employee Assistance Programmes if available. Support local and National campaigns to raise awareness and reduce stigma. Consider introducing a buddy scheme to support all employee.
- **Use technology**
Working from home can be challenging and isolating. To maintain contact with employees, arrange virtual social events such as a quiz as well as usual team meeting, frequent 1-1s and informal check ins, using virtual technology. Promote smartphone apps to help reduce stress and tackle sleep problems. Encourage employees to undertake e learning, freely available from the [Open University](#) and the Government's [skills toolkit scheme](#). There also are numerous free mental health e learning opportunities such as the 5 minute or 20 minute [Suicide Alliance training](#).
- **Maintain a healthy work/life balance**
Encourage employees to have regular breaks and rest, including screen breaks, as well as ensuring that employees take their full holiday entitlement. Time off work is not a 'nice to have' but an essential element of building resilience during COVID-19. Encourage employees to switch off at the end of the working day, especially if working from home and to prioritise sleep. Lead by example by sharing examples of employer's wellbeing activities.
- **Integrate wellbeing**
Ensure workplace wellbeing becomes part of the company's culture into the future, is supported from the top down and is led by example. This includes ensuring that the mental health and wellbeing needs of leaders and managers are also considered and met. Consider using [wellbeing action plans](#) as an employer or with employees, to identify issues early and agree the base way forward.

Mental health information and resources

The Public Health Workplace Health Team has produced a suite of [guidance documents](#) to support employee health and wellbeing during COVID- 19, including advice on mental health.

Guidance on bereavement and sources of support has developed by Public Health for [Milton Keynes](#) and for [Bedford Borough and Central Bedfordshire](#).

Details of the Milton Keynes, Bedford Borough and Central Bedfordshire Healthy Workplace Award scheme are [here](#).

The [Time to Change Pledge](#) supports organisational commitment to mental health and wellbeing.

Guidance on [Talking to employees about COVID-19](#).

Guidance from MIND on [looking after your mental health](#) during Coronavirus.

'[Our Frontline](#)' offers round-the-clock one-to-one support, by call or text, from trained volunteers, plus resources, tips and ideas to look after your mental health.

Emotional support lines for employers and employees [Samaritans](#) or [Mind BLMK](#).

The [Bedfordshire Domestic Abuse Partnership](#) brings together key agencies across Bedfordshire to raise awareness, to deliver services and to work together to improve our local response to domestic abuse.

[MK Act](#) is a charity in Milton Keynes which works to support victims of domestic abuse.

Government advice on Domestic Abuse relating to Coronavirus can be found [here](#).

Information and guidance on the effect of COVID-19 on sleep from the [Sleep Foundation](#).

Futurelearn training in collaboration with Coventry University on [Remote Working](#) - Supporting employees to thrive at home during the coronavirus outbreak.

Minded offer free training and information on their Resilience Hub for front line workers.

<https://covid.minded.org.uk/>

Futurelearn is a free psychological first aid course which teaches responders how to give practical and emotional support on issues such as job worries, bereavement or isolation to those affected by coronavirus. <https://www.futurelearn.com/courses/psychological-first-aid-covid-19/>

Physical Activity

[Evidence](#) suggests that round one-third of adults in England risk their health and wellbeing through a lack of physical activity. This lifestyle choice is likely to be amplified as healthy routines are disrupted due to restricted access to gyms and leisure venues, anxieties around social distancing and the need for some people to self-isolate. Furthermore, there is a clear link between lack of physical activity and coronary heart conditions and the Centres for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) have reported that people with heart disease are at higher risk of COVID-19 complications.

What employers can do

- Promote physical activity in the workplace, including information on the benefits of physical activity.
- Offer or encourage opportunities to be active, avoid sedentary behaviours and take regular breaks.
- Tap into the community by promoting local exercise or wellbeing initiatives such as yoga, Pilates or running clubs.
- Encourage employees to cycle or walk to work by providing sufficient bike racks, incentive schemes for equipment.
- For employees working from home, encourage them to build activity into their day using digital exercise classes and apps or by encouraging breaks to go for a walk.

Physical activity information and resources

[NICE guidelines](#) for employers on how to encourage employees to be more physically active.

[Active 10](#) from the NHS allows employees to track and increase their walking.

[Couch to 5K](#) from the NHS for building up to running 5K over 9 weeks.

The Public Health Workplace Health Team have produced a suite of [guidance documents](#) to support employee health and wellbeing during COVID- 19 including advice on maintaining a healthy lifestyle.

National physical activity guidelines infographics can be accessed [here](#).

Healthy Eating

The [Centres for Disease Control and Prevention](#) (CDC) reported that people who are obese or have diabetes are at higher risk of COVID-19 complications. Eating a healthy diet can help [prevent the risk of type 2 diabetes and obesity](#). Moreover, eating a balanced diet including foods rich in vitamin D such as oily fish, [supports a healthy immune system](#).

What employers can do

- Promote healthy eating in the workplace, including information on the benefits of a healthy diet and maintaining a healthy weight. Consider how these messages will reach employees working from home.
- Encourage staff to drink plenty of water. [The Eatwell Guide](#) says an adult should drink 6 to 8 glasses of fluid a day.
- Ensure healthy food is available to employees via vending machines or canteens. Consider providing fresh fruit for employees at work. Ensure that any facilities for food or drink provision is prepared, offered and consumed in a safe way in accordance with COVID-19 safety guidelines and food safety regulations.
- Tap into the community by promoting local healthy weight initiatives such as exercise classes or weight loss clubs.
- Signpost employees to information, healthy weight apps and digital resources to support employees.

Healthy eating information and resources

A guidance booklet for employers on promoting healthy eating can be accessed [here](#).

[A toolkit for employers](#) from Business in the Community (BITC) on healthy weight and physical activity.

The [ONEYOU](#) webpages contain healthy recipe ideas and tips and an app for meal ideas and other health information to support employees.

The [Change4Life](#) webpages provide food facts, recipe ideas, a food scanner app and a guide to understanding food labels.

Smoking

Emerging evidence from China shows smokers with COVID-19 are 14 times more likely to develop severe respiratory disease than non-smokers. Furthermore, the repetitive hand to mouth movement of smokers provides an easy route of entry for the virus, putting smokers at greater risk of contracting COVID-19. In light of the pandemic, there has never been a more important time to encourage employees to stop smoking. Once smoke free, there are very real health benefits with the body continuing to repair the longer someone stays smoke free. The more immediate benefits include:

- After 48 hours carbon monoxide is eliminated from the body. Lungs start to clear out mucus and other smoking debris.
- After 72 hours breathing becomes easier as bronchial tubes begin to relax.
- After 2 to 12 weeks blood circulation improves, making physical activity like walking and running easier.

What employers can do

- Ensure that stop smoking messages are promoted and facilitated.
- Local and National campaigns are supported.
- Information and publicity on the effects of smoking are publicised along with information and resources to support employees wishing to quit.
- Adopt a Smoke-free policy including clear no smoking signage on all indoor and outdoor areas. Establish a smoking and e-cigarette policy in your business place.
- Promote the Milton Keynes or Bedfordshire stop smoking service to your employees and allow time off for appointments, alternatively provide a support group for 7 weeks in partnership with the Stop Smoking Service.

Stop smoking information and resources

Evidence shows that people who receive support from a Stop Smoking Service are 4 times more likely to quit. Milton Keynes Council offers a free stop smoking service with well over half of those setting a quit date managing to quit. Further information can be found [here](#).

Click [here](#) for your local stop Smoking Service.

[NICE guidance](#) for employers on how to encourage and support employees to stop smoking.

Alcohol and Substance Misuse

COVID-19 is likely to have affected the use of drugs and alcohol. People who use these substances during social occasions may find they have cut down on them as social gatherings are restricted. Others may find they have increased their consumption as a way of coping with stress caused by COVID-19. This reliance will be amplified further as other healthy coping strategies, such as visiting gyms or accessing leisure facilities are restricted.

[New research](#) commissioned by charity Alcohol Change UK has found that more than one in five (21%) adults who drink alcohol are drinking more often since lockdown began. Worryingly, nearly one in five (18%) daily drinkers has further increased the amount they drink. Ensure you are meeting your legal requirements concerning drugs and alcohol for front line workers in essential roles and those working remotely. Review and update your workplace risk assessments and policies to ensure they apply to the current situation.

Drug and alcohol misuse has a big impact on the workplace. [The National Institute for Health and Clinical Excellence \(NICE\)](#) estimates that the cost of alcohol-related absenteeism in England is £1.7 billion per year.

Work problems resulting from hangovers or being drunk at work include difficulty concentrating; reduced productivity; mistakes and workplace accidents.

What employers can do

- Make information easily available, including about the effects of alcohol and substance misuse and local support services and how to access them support. This information should include an overlap with mental health and emotional wellbeing and be accessible to employees working from home.
- Develop a policy including guidelines for business functions. Review and update your workplace risk assessments and policies to ensure they apply to the current situation.
- Provide resources or training for managers to recognise the signs of substance misuse and how to support staff appropriately.
- Signpost staff to local support services and online self-help tools.
- Promote local and national campaigns initiatives such as Dry January.
- Where smoking areas are provided, ensure social distancing rules can be adhered to.

Drug and substance misuse information and resources

[Drink Aware](#) provides a range of resources and support to help achieve a healthy lifestyle. Useful tips and further information can be found on the [OneYou](#) website.

The Institute of Alcohol Studies has produced a guidance sheet on [alcohol in the workplace](#). The [Addiction Recovery Community](#) (ARC) is an adult drug and alcohol addiction service for Milton Keynes residents.

Path 2 Recovery is an adult drug and alcohol addiction service for [Bedford Borough](#) residents and [Central Bedfordshire](#) residents.

Further information can be found on the Milton Keynes Council [workplace health webpages](#) applicable to workplaces across Bedford Borough, Milton Keynes and Central Bedfordshire.



COVID-19 Wellbeing checklist for employers



The Prince's
Responsible
Business Network

COVID-19 WELLBEING CHECKLIST FOR EMPLOYERS

Mental Health

- ✓ Implement [the Mental Health at Work Commitment through a COVID-19 lens](#) actions.

Social Isolation and loneliness

Tailor messages to lead with the altruistic purpose of social distancing and isolation

- ✓ Take an inclusive approach, leading with empathy and compassion
- ✓ Enable social connection.

Financial wellbeing

- ✓ Review any work-related factors negatively impacting employee's financial wellbeing and take action to mitigate these risks

Physical activity and healthy eating

- ✓ Encourage employees to protect themselves and others against COVID-19
- ✓ Share reputable free resources
- ✓ Find creative ways to help employees to support and encourage each other with physical activity and healthy eating

Drugs, alcohol and tobacco

- ✓ Meet your legal requirements
- ✓ Help employees to become aware of their intake and educate employees on the impact of these substance
- ✓ Encourage health alternatives to cope with stress.

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