

Monday 10 January 2022
(amended Tuesday 11 January 2022)

CORONAVIRUS (COVID-19)

Update 64

Furloughing guidance information

ANMF is receiving member inquiries about the application of the healthcare worker furlough guidelines.

The Victorian Department of Health's '*Healthcare service contact assessment and management guidance: Health services (hospitals)*' was last updated on 30 December 2021. The Department of Health continues to update the guidance to reflect changes to contact management advice, in line with COVID-19 epidemiology, the public health response and operational impact on health service delivery.

A flowchart from the Victorian Department of Health's '*Strategies to mitigate healthcare staffing shortages*' (31 December 2021) provides important information about how furloughing and return to work decisions are made. The flow chart is available via <https://bit.ly/3zICqy4> or at the end of this PDF newsflash.

What has changed?

Close contact has been redefined as household type contact of four hours or more.

As a member of the community, a close contact of a COVID-19 positive person (including a health care worker) must get tested, and if positive, must quarantine for 7 days.

If your contact with a COVID-19 positive person is not determined to be a close contact (such as where you visit a retail site where a COVID positive person was present), and you are asymptomatic, you can continue working, and no quarantine is required.

If your contact with a COVID-19 positive person is not determined to be a close contact (such as a workplace, social or educational setting) and you are asymptomatic, **you can continue working but must undertake five daily negative RATs**. No quarantine is required. In the event of any of the RAT being positive, you would then be treated as a positive case and fully quarantine. (*The original issue of this newsflash stated you could work after five daily negative RATs – this has since been clarified. This measure is intended to mitigate critical understaffing levels taking into consideration the low risk that the employee will be COVID positive.*)

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The above exemptions require you to wear an N95 mask at work, have breaks alone, and participate in surveillance testing. Members have raised issues about the need for extended breaks to be able to access outside areas which are further away from their ward or unit and separate fridges. ANMF will be raising these issues with the Victorian Health Department. Health services are required to provide appropriate access to amenities for contacts to have these breaks, and staff should not be expected to be taking breaks in cars or in inappropriate areas. The Victorian Department of Health document 'COVID-19 Best practice approaches for safe staff amenities for health services' provides guidance on appropriate amenities via <https://bit.ly/3EWnpKc>

If your contact was in a home-like setting, but for less than 4 hours, you should contact the Infection Prevention department at your workplace. With your agreement, and subject to a risk assessment, you can return to work (provided you are asymptomatic) and have a negative RAT, and otherwise follow the same restrictions above while at work.

What if I test positive?

If you test positive on a RAT you are a case, without any requirement for a PCR test and quarantine accordingly.

You must contact each of your employers.

If you test positive via a rapid antigen test you are now required to notify the Victorian Department of Health via an online form at <https://www.coronavirus.vic.gov.au/report> or call the Coronavirus Hotline on [1800 675 398](tel:1800675398)

All confirmed cases are released from quarantine on Day 7 from first positive PCR test or RAT date.

What about special paid leave?

Public sector members are reminded that if they are required to furlough in accordance with the pandemic orders (see <https://bit.ly/34n07jX>), they will be able to access special paid leave from their employer during the isolation or mandatory quarantine period. ANMF encourages all employers to follow this guidance, however, recognise that enforcement is limited to public sector employers only. For more information read the Victorian Department of Health's 'Coronavirus Guidance Note on Employment-Related Matters' via <https://bit.ly/2UhDSU2>

Public sector members also receive special paid leave of up to 2 days per occasion is also available if you feel unwell following vaccination, including the third dose.

What if I have a question about how the risk was determined?

There is room in the guidance for interpretation. Individual circumstances should be taken into account, but the department's document provides clear guidance around determining the risk for most circumstances.

At all times the Health and Safety Rep is able to request involvement in the consultation in relation to the risk assessment. The guidance also says the risk assessment should be documented and available for review on request.

How can I be expected to go back to work, but be isolating outside of work?

This is due to the additional protective requirements in place whilst at work. If this is the case, a respirator is required to be worn on site at all times, and it is likely that all other workers on site are also in respirators.

There is a requirement to minimise contact with other workers as far as is possible such as separate break spaces.

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The infection prevention protections in place in a healthcare workplace far exceed those that are in place in the general public, hence the reason that the risk assessment has determined that it is acceptable to return to work.

Third vaccination dose now required

Healthcare workers eligible to receive an additional COVID-19 vaccine by 12 January 2022 are required to receive a COVID-19 third dose vaccine by 12 February 2022.

Healthcare workers not yet eligible to receive an additional COVID-19 vaccine by 12 January 2022 are required to receive their COVID-19 third dose vaccine by 29 March 2022.

By 12 February 2022, all healthcare workers eligible to receive their COVID-19 third dose vaccine must provide evidence of their COVID-19 third dose vaccination status, or a medical exemption by authorised medical practitioner to be able to come to work.

Further support if you are furloughed?

If you or a colleague is furloughed, regardless of sector or workplace, please remember support is available via the free, confidential Nursing and Midwifery Health Program Victoria for support on 9415 7551 or email admin@nmhp.org.au. For details <https://www.nmhp.org.au>

Need ANMF advice or support?

Members can complete an online Member Assistance inquiry form via anmfvic.asn.au/memberassistance (scroll to the bottom of the page).

ANMF Job Reps and Health and Safety Reps are encouraged to display this newsflash on their workplace noticeboard.

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Figure 1: Employee Furlough and Return to Work Flowchart

