

## Resumed Office? Preventive and response measures MHA expects the Employers to be aware of

written by Sindhuja Kashyap | June 15, 2020



What Measures did MHA Advise to Offices Resuming Operations?

Ministry of Home Affairs (“MHA”) has unlocked the nation from June 04, 2020 and clearly anticipates the future of this unlock. Offices and other workplaces have been permitted to open (other than in containment zones) with full capacity unless otherwise ordered by the State/UT governments. Workplace is usually a closed setup area with more shared space and infrastructure making it vulnerable to mass spread. Therefore, with the intent to contain the spread, morbidity, and mortality, MHA issued “SOP on preventive measures to contain the spread of COVID-19 in offices” on June 04, 2020,<sup>[1]</sup> wherein a list of preventive and responsive measures have been outlined for office spaces.

As per the MHA Order dated May 30, 2020<sup>[2]</sup>, it is very evident that under no circumstances are the employers permitted to demand employees considered as vulnerable persons i.e employees above 65 years of age, employees with comorbidities and employees who are pregnant to visit office premises, except for essential purposes.

MHA has laid down two categories of preventive measures namely generic and specific which are required to be followed by all (employees and visitors). This article simplifies the measures below:

### Generic Preventive Measure

1. Social Distancing (6 ft distance) to be maintained in all public places (such as cafeterias, lounges, seating areas, etc) as far as feasible;
2. Mandatory use of face mask/covers;
3. Hand Washing (for at least 40-60 seconds) to be practiced frequently despite the visible cleanliness of the hands;
4. Availability and usage (for at least 20 seconds) of alcohol-based hand sanitisers wherever feasible;
5. Respiratory Etiquettes: Covering mouth and nose while coughing/sneezing with a tissue/handkerchief/flexed elbow and disposing tissues adequately;
6. Consistent self-monitoring of health and earliest reporting of the illness to the immediate supervisor;
7. Strictly prohibiting spitting in and around the office premises;
8. Advisable usage of the Aarogya Setu App.

#### Specific Preventive Measure to be followed by Offices

1. Entrance screening: Mandatory usage of hand sanitisers and thermal screening at the entrance of the office. Any person detected to have a temperature more than the normal body temperature shall not be permitted. Entry shall only be permitted if the entrant is using a face cover/mask and the same needs to be worn at all times inside the office premises;
2. Only asymptomatic employees/visitors shall be permitted in the offices;
3. Drivers shall ensure social distancing and such other preventive measures must be adequately maintained in the vehicle. The vehicles shall be disinfected using a 1% sodium hypochlorite solution/ spray. Proper disinfection of steering, door handles, keys, etc. should be taken up;
4. Containment Zones: No employees/staff residing in containment zones shall be allowed to visit the office until such zone is denotified as a containment zone. Such employees/staff shall inform the same to their supervisory officer at the earliest. These staff/employees shall be permitted to work from home. Employers are restricted from considering such work from home as leave period. Similarly, drivers residing in containment zones shall not be permitted to drive vehicles;
5. Social Distancing: Seating arrangements to be made in consonance with the social distancing. The number of people in lift permitted shall also align with the social distancing, cafeterias (shops, stalls, etc), kitchens of such cafeterias and parking lots shall ensure social distancing at all times. Social distance markings shall be made in premises for ease of compliance;
6. Seating in such cafeterias shall have a distance of at least 1 meter between patrons and the wearing of face masks/covers and gloves by the staff/waiters shall be compulsory;
7. Sanitisation: Frequent cleaning and sanitisation of the workplace, lavatories, drinking and handwashing areas, frequently touched areas such as doorknobs, elevator buttons, handrails, etc;
8. All face masks/covers/gloves as used by the visitors/employees shall be properly disposed of;
9. In case vulnerable persons are required to visit the office, they should preferably not be exposed to any front-line work wherein direct contact with the public is required;
10. Visitor/temporary passes shall be suspended. Visitors to showcase proper permission of the officer intending to meet shall suffice the requirement of the entry (apart from the Entrance Screening process in (i) above);
11. Posters/standees/AV Media on preventive measures of COVID shall be adequately displayed at conspicuous places;
12. Meetings (as far as possible) shall be conducted through video conferencing to avoid any kind of assembling of employees/staff. All kind of large gathering should be strictly prohibited;
13. Break time of staff (lunch hours and coffee breaks) and as far as possible the office hours shall be staggered;
14. Parking Lots: Operating staff of the valet parking shall wear face mask/cover and gloves as deemed fit. Proper sanitisation of the steering, doors, keys should be taken care of;
15. Separate entry and exit for officers, staffs and visitors to be organised as per feasibility;
16. Washrooms: Regular supply of hand sanitisers, soap and running water must be ensured;

17. For offices, handling supplies, inventories and goods, adequate precautions shall be ensured;
18. Air Conditioning and Ventilation: Guidelines<sup>[3]</sup> as issued by CPWD shall be followed such as temperature setting of all air conditioning devices should be in the range of 24-30°C, relative humidity should be in the range of 40-70%. Fresh and cross ventilation should be adequately available.

What's next in case of the occurrence of COVID case(s)?

MHA does not rule out the possibility of the occurrence of cases among the employees. Following are the measures that should be taken up:

1. The identified ill person shall be placed in an isolated room in the workplace and be provided with mask/cover until he/she undergoes examination by the doctor;
2. Employer shall immediately inform the nearest medical facility or call the state or district helpline;
3. The designated public health authority shall make a risk assessment and advise the employer accordingly for all future actions required;
4. In case of very mild/mild symptoms, the employee/staff shall be placed under home isolation;
5. In case of moderate to severe symptoms, the employee/staff shall be treated as per health protocol in an appropriate health facility;
6. The rapid response team of the concerned district shall be requisitioned and will undertake the listing of contact.
7. In case of a positive result of COVID test, contact tracing and disinfection of workplace shall be undertaken.

There could also be chances of a large number of pre-symptomatic/asymptomatic cases and emerging of cluster cases in workplace. In such circumstances, the scale of arrangements as mentioned above shall be higher.

Effect of such confirmed cases on other employees

Contacts are persons who have been exposed to the confirmed case (staff) anytime between 2 days prior to onset of the symptoms and the date of isolation. For the purpose of listing of contacts, MHA has adequately divided them into high-risk and low-risk contacts depending on the kind of contacts a person may have had with the confirmed/isolated case. The high-risk exposure contacts shall be quarantined for 14 days and undergo testing as per ICMR protocol. The low-risk exposure contacts shall continue to work and closely monitor their health for the next 14 days.

When will the workplace be closed?

1. For 1-2 reported cases: The employer is not required to close the entire building or halt work in areas other than those visited by the patient in the past 48 hrs. However, the employer must comply with the disinfection procedure<sup>[4]</sup> of such places/areas visited by the patient in the past 48 hrs.
2. In case of a large outbreak (probably more than 2 or so): The building/block will be closed for 48 hours after thorough disinfection. Staff/Employees shall be required to work from home until the building is declared fit for re-occupation.

Conclusion

MHA has indeed worked efficiently during this pandemic situation to ensure timely circulation of all possible notifications/guidelines on the management and measures to be undertaken by specific and general functioning of the country. While the functionality of the majority of services in the country has resumed from June 04, 2020, popularly being referred to as Unlock 1.0,

the spread and vulnerability have only increased. While offices, factories and industrial establishment that are not in the containment zones have resumed their operation to revive their financials, they must in parallel also ensure compliance with all possible preventive measures to safeguard from the increase of cases thereby preventing their premises from being shut down temporarily, yet again.

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- [1] <https://www.mohfw.gov.in/pdf/1SoPstobefollowedinOffices.pdf>
  - [2] [https://www.mha.gov.in/sites/default/files/MHAOrderDt\\_30052020.pdf](https://www.mha.gov.in/sites/default/files/MHAOrderDt_30052020.pdf)
  - [3] <https://www.nabh.co/images/COVID19/cpwd%20AC%20guidelines.pdf>
  - [4] <https://www.mohfw.gov.in/pdf/Guidelinesondisinfectionofcommonpublicplacesincludingoffices.pdf>

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