

The exact action plan you should follow at work if you think you might have coronavirus — plus the email you should send your boss to break the news

[Erin Greenawald](#) Apr 6, 2020, 3:25 PM



First things first, do not go into your office if you're not working from home. Getty Images

Maybe you've [woken up with a fever](#), or suddenly [can't taste](#) the normally-delicious home-chef feast you've cooked up. Maybe you've just been around someone who's come down with coronavirus, so you know you've almost certainly been exposed to the disease.

For whatever reason, if you think you have COVID-19, you're probably already stressed enough about your health and the health of your loved ones — the last thing you likely want to be thinking about is work. Unfortunately, one of the first

things you need to think about is work. You'll want to communicate with your company quickly to come up with a plan for how you'll navigate through this disease together.

And while you kind of already know how to handle this — you've probably called in for sick days before — it's also uncharted territory in terms of how you'll feel, emotionally and physically, and how much time you'll need to heal.

We're here to make the process easier for you. Business Insider chatted with HR and workplace communication experts to compile your step-by-step guide for dealing with work when you think you have COVID-19.

Don't go into work, effective immediately

A quick note on public health bears repeating: If you're working at an essential business that is still requiring employees to come in and work, that needs to stop as soon as you even have an inkling that you may have coronavirus.

Don't wait a few days to see how it pans out. Don't go in to talk to your boss about the fact that you might have the disease. Full stop. In doing so, you very much risk spreading it to more people.

If you're in this situation, you're going to want to reach out to your boss via email immediately to let them know not to expect you in that day and going forward, so you might not have time to go through all the steps below.

A quick note like this should give them a heads up and buy you some time to prep before you have a full conversation:

Hi [boss' name],

I've woken up this morning with some symptoms similar to COVID-19 and, to avoid potentially spreading it, don't think it's wise for me to come in today. Can we set up some time later today to talk about the best plan moving forward?

[Your name]

If you're already working from home, skip this initial message and take a little time to fully prepare before you raise the flags.

Look for your company's policy

There's a chance your company has already done the hard work for you and released a policy for exactly how it should be handled if an employee comes down with coronavirus, outlining who should be notified, what time off you're entitled to, etc. If you haven't been avidly reading every bid of crisis communication they've been putting out, double check your recent all-company emails to see if there are guidelines you should follow.

Even if your company hasn't released a policy yet, the federal government has, and it's worth reviewing what time off you're allowed if you need it.



Annmarie Neal. Annmarie Neal

As Annmarie Neal, CHRO at HR tech company [Ultimate Software](#), explained, "The [Families First Coronavirus Response Act \(FFCRA\)](#) that goes into effect on April 2 provides funds for employers with fewer than 500 employees to offer two weeks (80 hours) of paid sick leave for anyone who is unable to work because they are quarantined under government order or on the advice of a healthcare provider." They are required to offer this leave at 100% of your salary, up to \$511 a day. If your company is under 50 employees, they may ask to be exempt if it "would jeopardize the viability of the business," Neal added.

This is also a good time to check in on how many sick and vacation days you have accrued in case you need to use them, and what your company's policy on unpaid sick leave is for a worst-case scenario.

"In states like [California with mandated sick pay laws in place](#), employees have the option of whether to use their sick days or not," said Neal. "If the employee wants to save those sick days for another time, employers would then need to honor that request and offer unpaid time off. Some employers may choose to advance vacation or paid time off to help employees cover absences due to COVID-19, but they are not required to do so."

Reflect on how you're feeling and outline a plan as to how often you'll work and what will happen to your current projects

Once you know what you're entitled to, it's time to figure out what you actually need.

People experience this disease in very different ways. You may feel completely wiped out and unable to work or, like [CNN anchor Chris Cuomo](#), you may still feel like you're able to do your job from home.



Sarah Sheehan. Sarah Sheehan

Your boss doesn't know how you're feeling, and Sarah Sheehan, founder and president of workplace coaching company [Bravely](#), said she would remind an employee going through this that you're in a position to clearly communicate your needs from the get-go. When you have this conversation, she said, "Have a game plan together for how you think this should be handled."

If you feel like you're okay to keep working remotely, "Talk through how you're going to approach that," said Sheehan. For example, "Maybe you're going to take more breaks during the day. And then also have a game plan for what will happen if [you] get to a point where you don't feel like you can work," she added.

You don't know how this will progress over the next few weeks, so lay out now what projects can be put on pause or whom you'll transfer responsibilities to. If you're a manager, you'll also want to think about how to communicate this to your employees, what they can expect from you in the coming weeks, and what you'll need from them.

If you feel comfortable, you can also talk about your emotional needs, and what support you might need there.

"I think that you have an opportunity here to be more vulnerable than you ever have before, and to share not just how you're going to approach your work, but how you're feeling," said Sheehan. "Like if you have high levels of anxiety or stress associated with this, I think it's completely appropriate for you to share that right now. I think sharing more actually helps to set expectations and can open up a larger dialogue."

And if you need or just want to take the time to focus on your health, communicate how much time you think you'll need and how you'll communicate with the company on your health status and when you feel you're ready to come back to work.

Reach out to your manager (or HR, or whomever you feel most comfortable with)

Once you have a rough plan in place, it's time to rip the Band-Aid off and have the conversation — you'll probably feel better once you do.

"When we're in the midst of feeling like we don't know what's going to happen, we can quickly spiral into this place of worrying and our stress levels rise," said Sheehan. "Focus on what you can control in the moment, like having these conversations, being proactive, and really communicating what you need."

In terms of whether you should talk to your boss or HR first and whether you should do an email or a phone or video call, Sheehan suggested going with

whatever's most comfortable for you (considering you're already under enough stress).

"I would say identify who you have the closest relationship with. If that's someone in HR, then you should feel free to go to them, but typically it is your manager," she said.

Then, you might open with an email along the lines of:

Hi [name],

Unfortunately, I think I may have come down with COVID-19. I'm feeling [a quick description of how you're doing] and, as of now, think I [will/will not] be able to work from home while I get through this.

I'm thinking my plan will be [outline your plan for getting your work done or the time off you think you'll need and how you'll pass off responsibilities], including:

- *[action item 1]*
- *[action item 2]*
- *[action item 3]*

I'll let you know ASAP if my health status changes and we need to adjust.

Would be happy to hop on a call today to talk through this and finalize next steps. Also, please let me know if there's anything I need to do from an HR standpoint.

Thanks,

[Your name]

What might HR need from you, you ask?

"Your employer cannot currently require a doctor's note to prove you have tested positive for the coronavirus," said Neal, considering testing is so hard to come by in many states. But they may ask if you've been around any other employees in the past few weeks so they can notify them that they may have been exposed.

"That said, there are [privacy regulations](#) in place that give diagnosed employees the option to control whether their name will be disclosed with affected employees," she said.

Finally, once you agree on a plan, put it in writing — and don't be afraid to communicate new needs as things progress.

"I'm someone that will try to be the hero in every situation. Like even if I'm sick I'll say, 'Well, I can still do X, Y, and Z,' and now's not the time to do that," said Sheehan.

Take care of yourself and don't be afraid to ask for what you need — we're all going through a crazy time right now, and most companies will be more understanding than ever.

Do you have a personal experience with the coronavirus you'd like to share? Or a tip on how your town or community is handling the pandemic? Please email covidthips@businessinsider.com and tell us your story.

And get the latest [coronavirus analysis and research](#) from Business Insider Intelligence on how COVID-19 is impacting businesses.