

► Guidance on occupational safety and health for domestic workers and employers to prevent and mitigate COVID-19



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*Guidance on occupational safety and health for domestic workers and employers
to prevent and mitigate COVID-19*

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► Foreword

The protection of the safety and health of workers in the workplace is one of the pillars of the ILO policy framework for responding to the COVID-19 crisis. International labour standards conceive safety and health at work as a responsibility between the employer and the worker. The employer has the obligation to provide a safe and healthy working environment by eliminating and controlling the risks, training workers and providing them with information and tools to prevent occupational accidents and diseases. Workers are required to follow the safety and health guidance that is provided by the employer and to use substances, tools and personal protective equipment as instructed by the employer.

However, enforcing these duties can be particularly challenging when it comes to domestic workers. This is because occupational safety and health and labour laws often exclude domestic workers from their scope of application or are silent about the inclusion of this category of workers. Moreover, even when occupational safety and health laws explicitly cover domestic workers, it is still difficult to ensure that the law is complied with since domestic work occurs in private dwellings that cannot be accessed by labour inspectors.

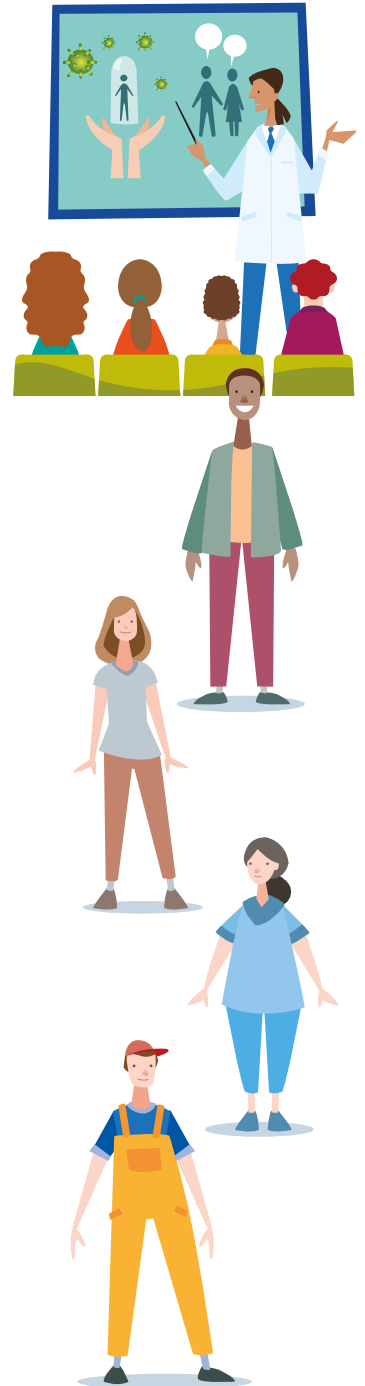
Legal gaps, the limited inspection action that can be taken for domestic workers and their often very vulnerable conditions render the monitoring of the occupational safety and health of domestic workers even more complex than it is for other categories of workers. Yet in the time of the COVID-19 pandemic, such monitoring is more than ever needed to ensure that domestic workers are safe and healthy in order to protect them, their families and the families they work for from contracting COVID-19 and to prevent the further spread of the coronavirus. To that end, dialogue and collaboration between domestic workers and employers has become absolutely necessary. Preventing COVID-19 contagion both in the workplace and during transfers to and from the workplace requires the introduction and respect of new health and safety measures at work. Moreover, the pandemic has made it more urgent to guarantee the right of access of domestic workers to social protection schemes and health services since they have become extremely vulnerable because of the massive loss of jobs and working time that have resulted from governmental restrictions and the fear of contagion.

In this context, there is a growing need to provide practical guidance to domestic workers and their employers on how to prevent the risk of COVID-19 exposure. The global adaptation provided in this document was prepared by the Labour Administration, Labour Inspection and Occupational Safety and Health Branch (LABADMIN/OSH), based on a guide initially developed by the ILO Country Office for Mexico and Cuba.

We hope that the guidelines provided in this document will facilitate putting in place COVID-19 preventive measures for domestic workers, their employers and their families.

Joaquim Pintado Nunes

Chief, LABADMIN/OSH Branch



► Acknowledgments

These guidelines are an adaptation of the document *Guía de orientaciones de seguridad y salud en el trabajo frente a la COVID-19 para personas empleadoras y trabajadoras del hogar* (ILO, 2020), which was initially developed by the ILO Country Office for Mexico and Cuba with the support of the Sustainable Development Goals Fund. Tzvetomira Radoslavova and Ana Catalina Ramirez (LABADMIN/OSH) prepared this adaptation for a global audience. This publication was edited by Michael Rose and the graphic design was adapted by Françoise Masson.

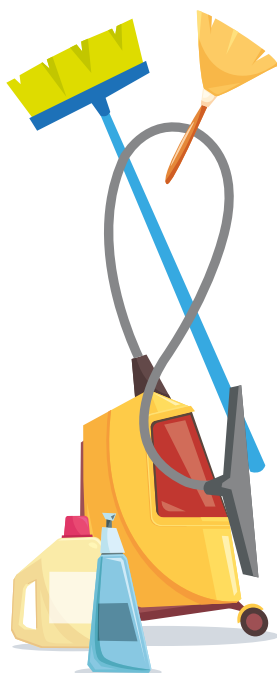


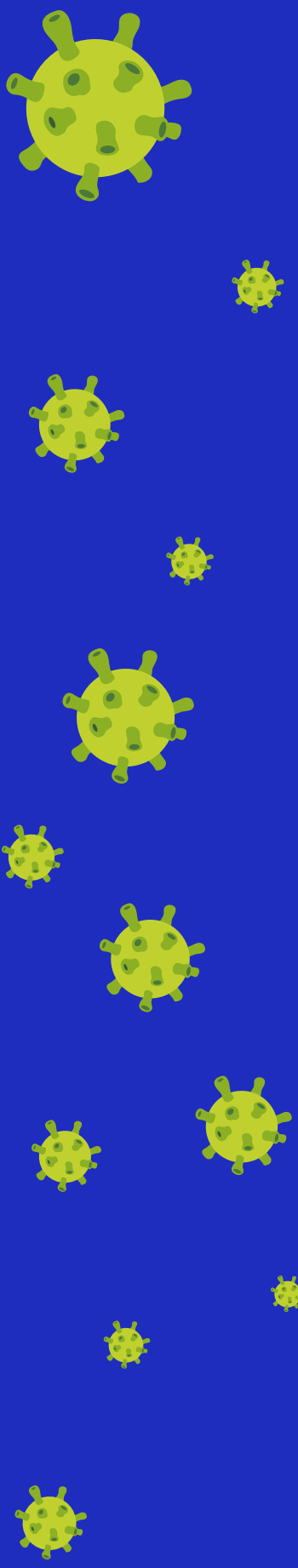
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► Introduction

The COVID-19 pandemic has had an unprecedented impact on the world of work. In this context, one of the most affected sectors has been domestic work, which employs about 75.6 million persons. Even though a substantial number of men work in the sector – often as gardeners, drivers or attendants – it remains a highly feminized sector: 80 per cent of all domestic workers are women.

Despite the important contribution that domestic workers make to society by caring for children, sick people and the elderly and assisting others with the maintenance of their homes and daily housekeeping and home chores, 81.2 per cent remain in the informal economy¹ and many experience poor working conditions.

The pandemic has further exacerbated the often very precarious situation of domestic workers. Many have had to stay at home, either due to lockdowns or at the request of their employers due to fear of contamination by the coronavirus. Consequently, an important volume of jobs was lost, with the decline in the number of domestic workers ranging from 5 per cent to as much as 70 per cent in some countries.¹

Further, the decrease in the total amount of wages received by domestic workers has been 1.5 to 5 times greater than that experienced by other employees.¹

Many migrant domestic workers who have lost their residence permits along with their jobs have found themselves unable to either secure new employment or return to their home countries because of border closures.

At the same time, many domestic workers earn as little as 25 per cent of average wage levels and only 10 per cent have access to social security, meaning that they have no access to health, no paid sick leave, no unemployment benefits and no savings to rely on.²

For those domestic workers who continue to work, the pandemic and the eventual normalization of activities has also implied the intensification of their tasks and the extension of working hours, thereby increasing their risk of exposure to both COVID-19 and other physical and psychosocial health risks related to their usual activities.

In this context and in order to contribute to improving the safety and health of domestic workers, it has been considered necessary to develop these guidelines. They target both employers and workers and provide guidance and recommendations to eliminate, prevent and mitigate the risks of exposure to COVID-19.

These guidelines are indicative and informative and do not create new responsibilities or replace existing legal obligations regarding occupational safety and health.

¹ ILO, *Making Decent Work a Reality for Domestic Workers: Progress and Prospects Ten Years after the Adoption of the Domestic Workers Convention, 2011 (No. 189)*, 2021.

² ILO, “Beyond Contagion or Starvation: Giving Domestic Workers Another Way Forward”, 2020.

► Objectives

- Guide domestic workers and those who employ them on taking preventive measures against the spread of COVID-19 and other risks associated with the pandemic, in the framework of the return to activities as restrictions and confinement measures are progressively lifted.
- Promote social dialogue and negotiation on safety and health at work between domestic workers and their employers.
- Encourage safe and healthy work practices, both physically and psychosocially.



► For whom is this guidance intended?

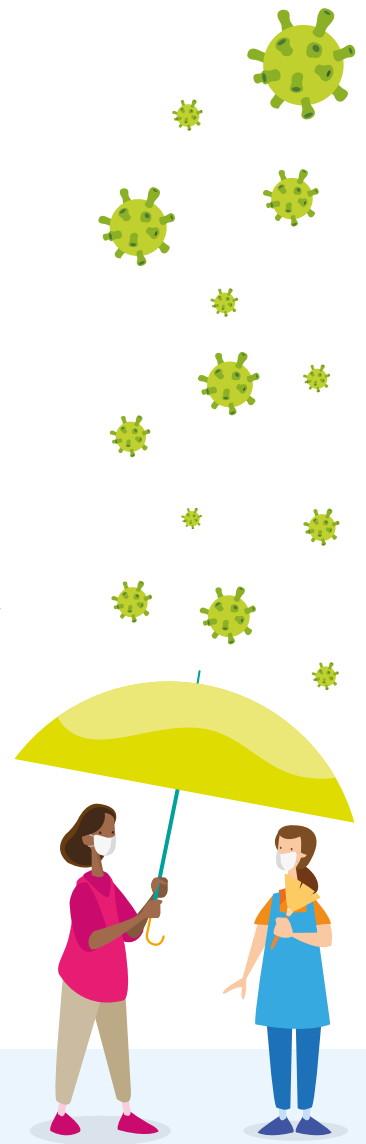
- **Domestic workers:** Any person who performs domestic work in or for a household or households within an employment relationship. This includes domestic workers engaged on a part-time basis and those working for multiple employers, nationals and non-nationals, as well as both live-in and live-out domestic workers.
- **Employers:** They may be a member of the household for which the work is performed or an agency or enterprise that employs domestic workers and makes them available to households.

► Principles

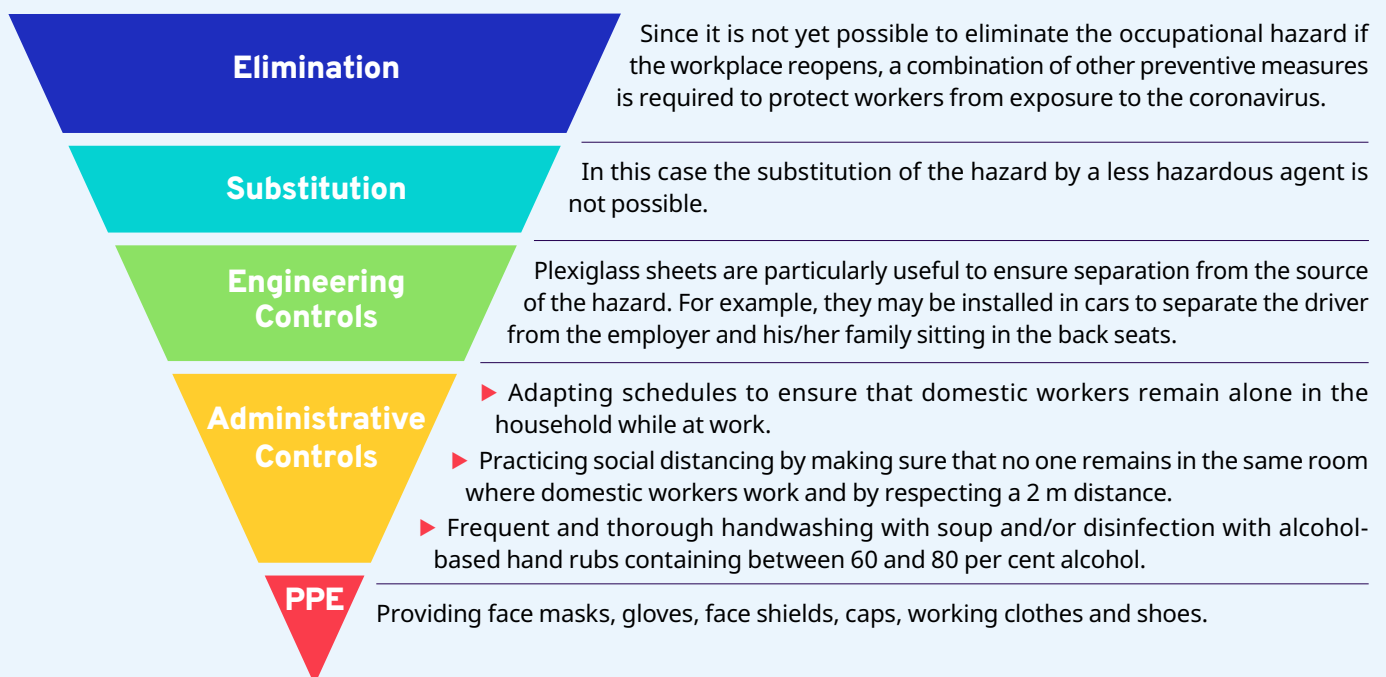
- Employers must ensure that domestic workers enjoy decent work. Decent work involves opportunities for work that is productive and delivers a fair income; security in the workplace and social protection for families; better prospects for personal development and social integration; freedom for people to express their concerns and to organize and participate in the decisions that affect their lives; and equality of opportunity and treatment for all women and men.
- Safety and health at work is the responsibility of employers and the right of workers, who have to cooperate with the employer in this regard. To ensure occupational safety and health in the context of COVID-19, it is essential to implement measures for eliminating and preventing the risk of transmission of the virus, as well as to provide workers with a safe return to their activities.
- The employer must ensure that, insofar as it is reasonable and feasible, all preventive and protective measures are adopted to minimize workplace risks.

- Workers have the obligation to cooperate in complying with the recommendations and indications of their employers with regard to safety and health measures, including self-care.
- Occupational safety and health should be seen as a fundamental investment to protect workers, employers and their respective families.

These guidelines follow the “hierarchy of controls” principle emanating from international labour standards, which prioritizes more effective control measures against occupational hazards over less effective measures. This means that, where possible, collective control measures that eliminate hazards and reduce the risk of exposure are prioritized over the use of personal protective equipment.



► Hierarchy of controls: examples of its application to COVID-19 prevention in domestic work



Note: this list with examples of preventive measures is not exhaustive.

Recommendations to prevent exposure and contagion by COVID-19



This section presents the main prevention and mitigation actions that employers and domestic workers should follow to avoid the transmission of and contagion by COVID-19.

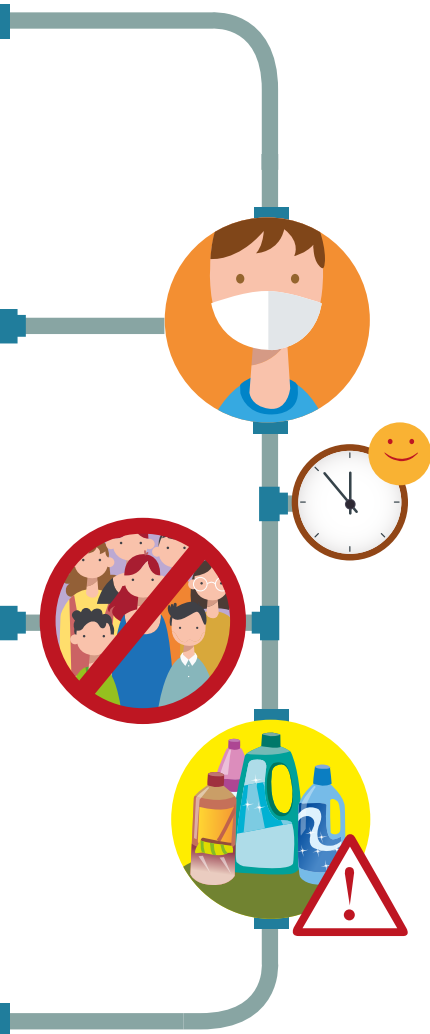
► Recommendations for employers

- Maintain constant communication with the worker about the pandemic and provide clear and timely information about preventive measures such as physical distancing; frequent handwashing with soap and water or an alcohol-based hand sanitizer; avoiding touching the eyes, nose and mouth; and the correct use of personal protective equipment such as masks and gloves.
- In the event that you or another resident of your home has symptoms of COVID-19, has tested positive for the coronavirus or has been in contact with a confirmed or suspected case, immediately inform the worker and instruct her/him not to come to work for at least two weeks or until the person in question tests negative. Get tested if possible and inform the worker if the test is positive. If you have been in contact over the previous few days, there is a chance that your domestic worker has been contaminated too and may need to be tested and/or quarantine as per the instructions provided by the competent authorities.
- In the event that your worker has symptoms of COVID-19, has tested positive for the coronavirus or has been in contact with a confirmed or suspected case, instruct her/him not to come to work for at least two weeks or until she/he has tested negative.

► The most common symptoms of COVID-19 are:

- Fever, fatigue or dry cough
- Body aches, nasal congestion, runny nose, sore throat, loss of taste or smell or diarrhea

- Consider the possibility of paying for a COVID-19 test for the worker (bear in mind that very few domestic workers can afford the test). You may also need to continue paying your workers' wages during the period of absence, in particular if she/he is not covered by benefits applicable to sick leave.
- Establish flexible entry and exit times to reduce the risk of exposure of the domestic worker in peak hours in public transport systems or, to the extent possible, offer the payment of taxi or similar individual transportation. If the worker provides his/her services to the same employer on different days of the week and part time, it may be advisable to group working periods into full working days to reduce the number of transfers and therefore the risk of contagion.
- Avoid (you and members of your household) remaining in the same room where your domestic worker is working to ensure social distancing. You may wish to schedule the intervention of your domestic worker during a time when you and your family will not be at home in order to minimize interaction and the risk of exposure.
- Refrain from requiring the worker to carry out activities in crowded places such as doing the groceries.



- Inform the worker about any new disinfecting products that you have bought (e.g., detergents), including any hazards to safety and health that these may pose, and give the worker instructions on how to use them safely.

► Remember that in the context of the COVID-19 pandemic, it is even more important to:

- Register the domestic worker in social security and make the corresponding contributions, according to applicable legislation.
 - Contribute to access to health services for the worker and her or his family.
 - Ensure that you and your family are registered with the social security system.
- Make sure that the worker is always treated with respect – free from any form of abuse, harassment or violence – by you or any member of your family. Also, bear in mind that problems between your family members can affect the worker.
 - Discuss with the worker any concerns that she/he may have in relation to her/his working conditions in general and potential contamination with the coronavirus, in particular in the course of work assignments.
 - Be flexible to accommodate any needs the worker may have in relation to the pandemic (e.g., do a test; see a doctor; have a vaccine; accompany a child or a sick, disabled or elderly family member to any of these appointments; care for a family member who has contracted COVID-19).
 - Provide the worker regularly and at no cost with personal protective equipment (i.e., face masks and gloves) to avoid the spread of COVID-19, according to the guidelines defined by health authorities. Instruct the worker not to share the personal protective equipment provided and to wash it after each use. Respect the maximum number of times that personal protective equipment may be reused without a decline in its effectiveness (consult the product maker, vendor or the competent authorities) and provide new equipment whenever needed.
 - Make sure that you and your family comply with preventive measures such as by physical distancing, frequent handwashing with soap and water or an alcohol-based hand sanitizer and avoiding touching the eyes, nose and mouth, as well as by wearing a mask when you cannot maintain a healthy distance.
 - Instruct the worker to take off her/his shoes and provide her/him with clean shoes to be used exclusively in the home. Alternatively, provide plastic protections that can be placed on the shoes to avoid importing viral particles.
 - If your domestic workers live in your home, make sure that they have an individual room where they can take breaks and sleep without the need to wear a mask, as well as a sanitary facility. This is equally important if they have to quarantine.



► **Know your legal obligations**

Remember that in an increasing number of countries you don't have just a moral obligation to ensure the safety and health of your domestic workers but a legal duty. Should you fail to comply with that duty, sanctions are applicable.

For example, according to Article 150 of the Labour Code of Nicaragua, employers are required to register their domestic workers with the social security system. Yet, article 68 of the OSH Law of Vietnam requires employers to guide domestic workers in the use of tools in their work and ensure their safety and health. Furthermore, in Portugal, article 26 of the Decree Law No. 235/92 on domestic workers states that the employer shall provide protective clothing and equipment in order to prevent, as far as possible, the risks of accidents and or harmful effects on workers' health.



Inform the worker that she/he must apply the following measures while carrying out her/his activities:

- Wash hands frequently with soap and water or disinfect with an alcohol-based hand sanitizer, especially when arriving home, before and after handling garbage, waste or food, as well as after touching surfaces such as handrails, doorknobs and railings or after handling money or keys or having contact with animals, among others.
- Keep at least 2 m apart from every person and greet them without making physical contact.
- Provide natural ventilation by opening doors and windows. If the workplace has a mechanical ventilation system, ensure the recirculation of outside air. Avoid using individual fans.
- Use the personal protective equipment provided, such as face masks and gloves. A face mask should be worn at all times, if possible, and is mandatory when sufficient social distancing cannot be ensured.
- When the domestic worker has to take care of sick persons, use additional personal protective equipment such as glasses, face shields, plastic caps and protective clothing that provides overall protection from the exposure to potentially infectious particles.
- Frequently clean surfaces and appliances and disinfect them with liquid solutions. For electronic and delicate devices, use solutions with a 70 per cent or greater alcohol content. For general surfaces such as doorknobs, household appliances and other tools, use 10 per cent chlorine solutions in water. Remind the worker to keep in mind that the chlorine and water solution must be prepared every day, while the alcohol and water solution can be prepared once a week.
- Do not touch your eyes, nose and mouth. Cover your mouth and nose when coughing or sneezing with the crook of your elbow or with a tissue. Do not share utensils for personal use (glasses, cutlery, personal hygiene items, etc.).
- Stay updated on the information published by the competent authorities on how to protect yourself against COVID-19.

► Recommendations for workers

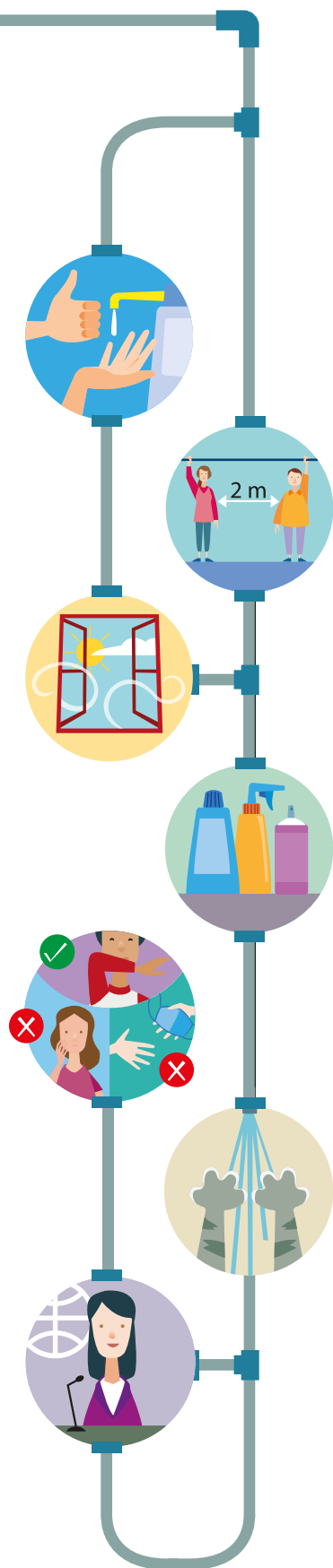
During the transfer to and from the workplace:

- Respect the recommended physical distance of 2 m when using public transportation. Try to keep an empty seat in the middle, both on either side and in front of and behind you. **If possible, propose to your employer that she/he support you by paying for a taxi or other form of individual transportation, while the pandemic lasts.**
- As far as possible, propose to your employer that she/he adapt your schedule so as to avoid crowds on public transportation during peak hours.
- Wear personal protective equipment such as masks, face shields, gloves, shoes, caps and protective clothing, as appropriate. Place the mask in such a way so as to cover your nose and chin. Personal protective equipment must be provided by employers at no cost to you.

During the development of your activities:

- Observe the preventive measures for safety and health at work established by your employer for the prevention of accidents and occupational diseases, as well as the recommendations to avoid the contagion and spread of COVID-19.
- Maintain a continuous dialogue with your employer and request that she/he provide you with clear and timely information on preventive measures.
- If applicable, agree to take the COVID-19 tests provided by your employer (these should never include pregnancy and HIV tests).





- Wash your hands frequently with soap and water or disinfect them with an alcohol-based hand sanitizer, especially when arriving at home; before and after handling garbage, waste or food; after touching surfaces such as handrails, doorknobs and railings or handling money and keys or having contact with animals; and both before and after wearing gloves and face masks, among others.
- Keep at least 2 m apart from anyone else as much as possible. Greet without making physical contact.
- Conduct your activities with doors and windows open for cross-air circulation if conditions permit.
- Carry out surface cleaning with 10 per cent chlorine solutions in water or 70 per cent alcohol solutions. It is important that the bleach solution be prepared daily and no other chemicals be added. Wear gloves when applying these products.
- Avoid touching your eyes, nose and mouth. Cover your mouth and cough or sneeze with the crease of your elbow or with a tissue. Do not share items for personal use.
- Stay up to date with the information provided by health authorities on how to protect yourself and others from COVID-19.
- Avoid going to public places or places with a high concentration of people.
- If you are in charge of caring for pets such as dogs, keep your walks short, conduct them at times and in places with no or very few people and avoid contact with other animals or people.
- Clean pets' paws and snouts with soap and water upon return from each walk. Afterwards, wash your hands with plenty of water and soap.
- Clean facemasks and gloves if they are reusable, according to the supplier or manufacturer's instructions. If they are disposable, put them in closed plastic bags and throw them away. This prevents such equipment from becoming a source of contamination.
- Use face masks and gloves (disposable or not), preferably during the entire working day. The employer must provide these since they are considered as a work item.
- Inform your employer immediately if you or any of the persons who live with you present symptoms related with COVID-19 or if you or any of the persons you live with have been in contact with a confirmed or suspected case.

► Remember that the most common symptoms related with COVID-19 are:

- Fever, fatigue or dry cough
- Body aches, nasal congestion, runny nose, sore throat, loss of taste or smell or diarrhea



Care of sick persons or persons with COVID-19 symptoms:

► This activity implies a high risk of exposure to COVID-19, so it is highly recommended that it be carried out exclusively by working people who are trained to care for sick people and that they have agreed with the employer to carry out such duties.

- Make sure you have gloves, face shields, eye protection or other personal protective equipment. Your employer must provide these.
- Reinforce personal hygiene, especially handwashing with soap and water.
- The person in quarantine should be isolated and in a well-ventilated room.
- If you are not treating the person directly, keep at least 2 m away. Wear a mask whenever you are in the same room as a person with a suspected or confirmed case of COVID-19. Discard the mask after use.
- When you urgently move a person with a suspected or confirmed case of COVID-19 or if you are caring for them directly — for example, feeding her/him — wear an apron, gloves, mask and eye protection. The employer must also provide these protective items.
- Use 10 per cent chlorine solutions to disinfect aprons or other protective items that are reusable.
- Put household waste in garbage bags and containers with lids. Always wash your hands afterwards.
- Wear gloves when handling dirty clothes and wash your hands with soap and water afterwards.





► **Get to know your rights and your duties: Available resources**

- Check out the Labour Code, the Occupational Safety and Health Law and measures that the Government has adopted during the pandemic. Domestic workers may be legally entitled to certain rights such as paid sick leave, unemployment benefit and so on. For example, the Government of Qatar has promised access to free testing and health care to all domestic workers, regardless of their status.
- If you are a domestic worker and have lost your job or a substantial proportion of your income, ask the authorities whether you are entitled to unemployment benefits. For example, Spain has created a special benefit for domestic workers registered with the social security system who have lost their jobs during the health crisis or whose contracts are suspended.
- Some countries have established funds to support domestic or informal workers. Many NGOs and workers' organizations are creating such funds to help their members. For example, the Jamaica Domestic Workers Union has created a HELP Fund through the fundraising platform Mightycause.com
- Local or national organizations of domestic workers and private household employers can provide information and support (for example the [International Domestic Workers Federation](#), the [United States National Domestic Workers Alliance](#), the [South African Domestic Service and Allied Workers Union](#), among others).

