

Update and information on the novel coronavirus for water and wastewater utilities

Following the first reports of cases of acute respiratory syndrome in the Chinese Wuhan municipality at the end of December 2019, Chinese authorities have identified a novel coronavirus as the main causative agent. The outbreak has rapidly evolved affecting other parts of China and outside the country. Cases have been detected in several countries in Asia, but also in Australia, Europe, Africa and North America.

According to the [European Centre for Disease Prevention and Control](#) (ECDC), so far all countries in the Danube region have recorded cases of infection with coronavirus. As with influenza viruses, the novel coronavirus is transmitted via direct bodily contact or via droplet infection. As far as we can judge at this moment, any transmission of coronavirus via public drinking water supply can be excluded.

IAWD wants to inform you about measures in water and wastewater utilities that can contribute to slowing down any further spreading of the virus and protect staff from being infected. For the staff of utility companies (as for the staff of other enterprises), the current situation demands above all a responsible approach to personal hygiene. Meticulous and frequent washing of the hands followed by disinfection as a key preventive measure is absolutely essential as a protection against infection, and in particular against coronavirus. If you have not already done so, we recommend you to inform your staff accordingly.

Utility companies are part of the critical infrastructure and the water sector assumes special importance in general and hence also in the current situation. An additional challenge exists, if a larger number of staff members are unable to carry out their duties due to illness or quarantine-related measures.

This is particularly true of those units of your company that must be staffed always without exception. In this context, we recommend to check your internal personnel plans to allow for redundancies and clarify persons who can replace infected persons.

The following general measures are to provide you with helpful indications for this purpose.

Recommended measures within the company

- Washing your hands is very useful!

Inform your staff about personal protective measures (see [ECDC information on effective hand washing](#)). Further information regarding personal protective measures can be found at [ECDC information on how to minimise the spread](#).

- Inform your staff that, for the employee's own protection as well as for the protection of the other staff members, a doctor must be immediately contacted by phone if there has been any contact with a person suffering from the disease or also after the first appearance of typical symptoms of the disease in order to clarify whether an infection with SARS-CoV-2 has occurred.

Regular cleaning with standard products offers good protection. Disinfection only makes sense in case of items that are used frequently and by several persons, e.g. door handles, keyboards, etc.

Not every disinfectant is effective against every pathogen. For effective use against COVID-19, the product label must state that it is "virucidal to a limited extent" as a minimum. These products, like soap, are effective against sensitive enveloped viruses such as SARS-CoV-2.

To avoid underdosing and eliminate the risk of chemical burns when diluting disinfectants, we recommend choosing products that can be used directly without any further manipulation (ready-for-use products).

Since disinfectants, too, have a limited shelf life, make sure to check the use-by date of all disinfectants stored at your premises.

- Rooms where staff members spend more time in should always be well ventilated.
- Hygiene masks should only be worn by sick persons (to protect others) and staff members treating persons (to protect themselves in case of close contact). These masks must be correctly put on and offer protection for one shift at most (8 hours).

It is not regarded as necessary that other persons wear such masks (keeping a distance of 1 metre to other persons offers protection).

- Develop an emergency response plan for your utility, including the formation of an in-house crisis unit.
- Define when such an in-house emergency response plan will take effect (this is best done after consultation with the pandemic crisis unit, if there is such a unit, or the competent public health authority in co-ordination with the municipal emergency response plan).
- Define when such an emergency response plan will be again suspended. In this context, bear in mind that pandemics usually come in waves, so that the disease may be present over many weeks. Thus, close contacts with the public health authorities are essential.
- Formulate an emergency communication plan and update it regularly. This should also take account of external contact points, e.g. public health authorities, crisis units.
- Identify critical points of your infrastructure (e.g. control room / subdivision by long-distance water companies, own supply of smaller water companies, property protection); also identify critical points that have a bearing on the commercial side of your company (ordering materials for water treatment, granting of permits, etc.).

- Identify persons essential for the continuity of operations as early as possible.
- Identify functions essential for the continuity of operations as early as possible.
- Train additional staff members who normally perform other tasks so that they can potentially assume key functions if needed (i.e. are able to substitute staff members).
- Determine the risks of absence of staff members (reasons may include illness of the respective staff member or members of his/her family, possibly also measures resulting from the local (municipal) emergency response plan to contain the pandemic as well as quarantine requirements, closure of schools and kindergartens, etc.).
- Clarify what potential travel restrictions might mean for your company (e.g. sampling staff).
- Train your staff with respect to the pandemic response plan developed for your company and all related measures.

Measures regarding contacts between your company and the municipality/competent public health authorities

- Clarify with the authorities in charge of health protection (usually, this is the public health authority) or, if available, with the pandemic crisis units of the municipality or district whether water supply is already part of the local pandemic response plan as a crisis-relevant task in addition to police, professional fire brigade, hospitals, etc.
- Maintain close and early contacts with the authorities in charge of health protection (usually, this is the public health authority) and with medical officers (if necessary, with the agency for occupational health) in order to discuss possible countermeasures to fight the coronavirus infection and make these measures part of the in-house emergency response plan.

Further up-to-date information about coronavirus is provided on the website of the [European Centre for Disease Prevention and Control](#) and by your competent public health authorities.