

CIRCULAR

What is social distancing?

Our ref. / 2020-008
Date of publication / 30 March 2020

Kris De Meester
First Adviser / Permanent
Delegate International Labour
Relations

Competence Centre
Employment & Social Security
T +32 2 515 08 92
kdm@vbo-feb.be

Summary

The ministerial decree implementing emergency measures to limit the spread of the coronavirus imposes a series of measures on businesses.

For those businesses wishing to guarantee the continuity of their activities, it is therefore critically important to be able to efficiently enforce social distancing in a way that enables the business to continue operating.

Contents

Summary	1
Contents	1
1 Context.....	2
2 Definition	2
3 Approach.....	3
4 Examples of social distancing measures within a business.....	3

1 Context

The [ministerial decree](#) implementing emergency measures to limit the spread of the coronavirus imposes a series of measures on businesses.

Businesses - regardless of their size - are required to organise teleworking for all jobs where possible, without exception.

- For those jobs where working from home is not possible, businesses must take the steps needed to ensure compliance with the social distancing rules, in particular the rule on people remaining at least 1.5 metres apart. This also applies to transport organised by the employer.
- Those businesses unable to comply with these rules must close.
- If the authorities detect non-compliance with the social distancing measures, the business will receive a stiff fine for the first offence. If the non-compliance continues, the business will be forced to close.
- These measures do not apply to businesses in critical sectors or to essential services. However, even critical sectors and essential services are required to implement, as far as possible, teleworking measures and to ensure compliance with the social distancing rules.

For those businesses wishing to guarantee the continuity of their activities, it is therefore critically important to be able to efficiently enforce social distancing in a way that enables the business to continue operating.

For critical sectors and essential services, this is a best-efforts obligation; for other activities, it is an obligation to achieve results.

- **Obligation of effort:** the business must make every effort to comply with the rules, but cannot be penalised or closed if this objective is not reached.
- **Obligation of result:** the business must follow the rules to the letter, and if the objective is not reached, it will receive a warning and/or a fine, which may be followed by closure.

2 Definition

'Social distancing' is the term used to describe a series of actions or measures designed to limit or control the infection in order to stop or slow down the spread of a contagious disease. The aim is to reduce the possibility of contact between people who have been infected and others, and thus minimise the spread of the disease.

It is effective in the case of infections which are transmitted by droplets (coughing, sneezing, runny nose), by direct physical contact, by indirect contact via contaminated objects or surfaces, or by air. Since this is the case with the coronavirus, social distancing is the indicated approach.

3 Approach

Some social distancing measures, such as quarantine, containment and the closure of schools, shops, leisure facilities, restaurants, bars and non-essential businesses and services, are imposed by government authorities. The ministerial decree is therefore in line with a social distancing approach imposed in response to the coronavirus.

Businesses are advised to base their approach on a risk assessment which sets out the risk in question, evaluates that risk and describes the preventive and protective measures taken for each activity/situation. It is possible to use an existing risk analysis carried out in connection with safety, health and well-being at work as a starting point. Should it prove impossible to enforce social distancing measures for certain activities, then the possibility of suspending such activities in order to protect other more essential activities or processes for which social distancing is possible can be considered. The situation must be clarified as follows: full continuation of activities, partial suspension of activities or closure (see also the diagram at the end of this text).

4 Examples of social distancing measures within a business

1. Keep your distance, i.e. stay at least 1.5 metres away from other people. This is the distance stipulated in the ministerial decree. The World Health Organization mentions 1 metre, but this distance pertains mainly to public spaces where meetings between people are more fleeting than in a working environment with colleagues. A distance of 6 feet (1.8 metres) is often mentioned in the scientific literature.
 - If your working space allows it, then increase the distance; if not, ensure a distance of at least 1.5 metres.
 - Use markings, ribbons or physical barriers to delimit areas or spaces/places.
 - Establish rules for entrances, exits and passageways using the means mentioned above.
 - Look into the possibility of staggering activities over the course of the working day, since doing so will automatically have an impact on the number of people present.
 - Likewise, stagger breaks as much as possible. Make sure that workers take breaks one after another, not at the same time.
 - See also point 3 on isolation and isolated work.
2. Limit the number of people allowed in spaces and places where groups can congregate. Even if the minimum distance between these individuals can be guaranteed, it is advisable to allow access only to those whose presence is essential. In other words, avoid unnecessary discussions at or visits to areas or places where workers should not work.

3. Isolation or isolated work is an extreme form of distancing. Normally, everything possible is done to avoid letting workers work alone, but in the current situation working alone can be a temporary option.
 - Move workstations to separate rooms, each of which is occupied by one person.
 - Compartmentalise workstations.
 - Teams that normally work in pairs can be reduced to one person, provided it is still possible to do the job.
 - If you are establishing a system where workers work alone, make sure to provide options to create social contact and/or to check up on people using walkie-talkies or other systems that do not require any action on the part of the recipient. 'Man Down' systems or other immobility detection systems can also be implemented to ensure the safety of lone workers.
4. Use alternatives for meetings, training sessions and consultations. Digital communication tools offer unprecedented possibilities for remote meetings. Early morning meetings and toolbox meetings can be held via a speaker system that allows everyone to stay at their desk and keep their distance.
5. No greetings that involve physical contact. There are plenty of alternatives to the handshake, but it is important to insist on this point repeatedly. Force of habit often takes over.
6. Strictly apply hygiene measures. Wash your hands regularly, including after touching objects or surfaces that have been touched by other people. If necessary, disposable gloves can be used.
7. If it is necessary to get closer than 1.5 metres to another person, keep such exposure as short as possible and limit the number of people in that kind of situation. Also bear in mind point 8.
8. Use protective equipment if it is necessary to get closer than 1.5 metres to another person or to enter an enclosed space where many people are present.
 - The use of masks cannot be an isolated measure, but rather must always be considered in conjunction with other preventive measures.
 - To be effective, masks must be used correctly and consistently throughout the period in which they are worn. When used correctly, they help prevent exposure.
 - 'Standard' masks and surgical masks constitute a physical barrier and protect workers against risks from splashes and large drops. They also trap particles and biological liquids emitted by the wearer, which means they also protect third parties from exposure caused by the wearer. In addition, they prevent you from touching your mouth or nose. These

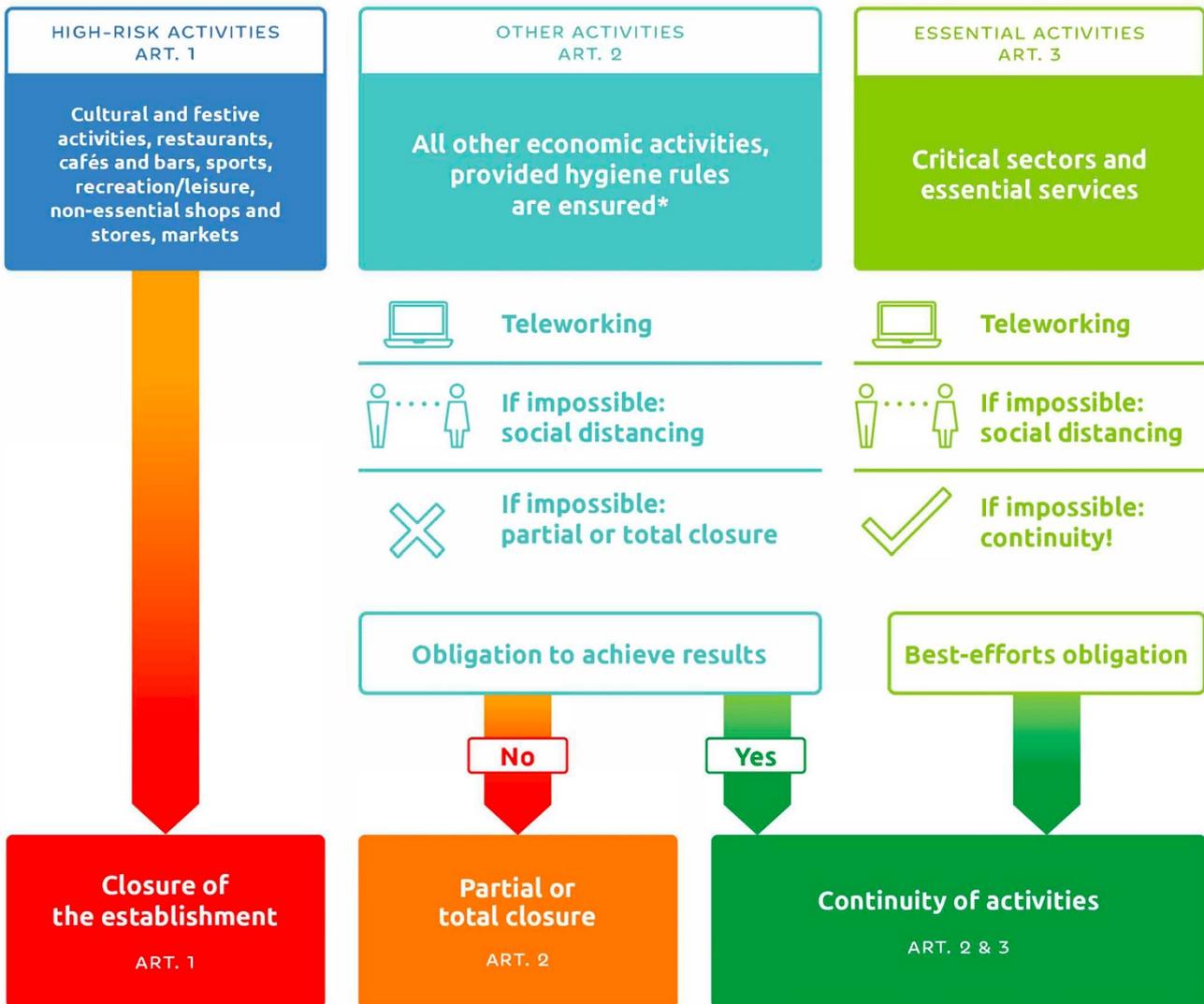
types of masks do not count as personal protective equipment. They do not protect the wearer from inhaling small particles or drops containing viruses. They do not form a seal on the face or filter out small particles.

- Appropriate personal protective equipment does protect the wearer. It is subject to stringent standards stipulating degrees of protection and it requires not only a risk analysis, but also efforts to inform and train the user.
- Also make sure to follow the guidelines for wearing protective equipment:
 - [Rational use of personal protective equipment for the coronavirus.](#)
 - [Tips for using masks in public areas, during home care and in a healthcare environment.](#)

IMPORTANT: Using personal protective equipment for activities that do not strictly require it, for the sole purpose of guaranteeing the continuity of activities for non-essential services or sectors, is contrary to the spirit of the measures taken in response to the coronavirus epidemic. Such use risks compromising the availability of PPE required for caregivers, response teams and other workers who handle dangerous substances and biological and chemical agents.

9. Restrict travel: only travel when absolutely necessary and when digital tools cannot provide a workaround.
10. Protective sequestration or confinement is an extreme form of distancing. It involves separating a limited group of healthy people in order to prevent them from coming into contact with the virus. These people stay in their perfectly confined 'safe' place of work round the clock. In fact, it is the opposite of a quarantine, which aims to isolate (potentially) contaminated people. Protective confinement could be enforced on a small number of workers who are of vital importance, preferably for the general need of society, and not merely for the economic considerations of the business in question. This kind of measure must be taken in consultation with the workers concerned and should ideally be discussed with the relevant authorities.

AUTHORISED AND PROHIBITED ECONOMIC ACTIVITIES



Source: Ministerial Decree of 23 March 2020 implementing emergency measures to limit the spread of the coronavirus (COVID-19).

* It is recommended that businesses justify their approach by conducting a risk assessment that sets out the risk in question, evaluates that risk and describes the measures taken for each activity/situation. An existing risk assessment carried out in connection with safety, health and well-being at work can be used as a starting point. It is recommended to make use of the expertise of internal and external occupational safety and health services. This will clarify the situation: full continuation of activities, partial suspension of activities, or closure.