

MANAGING COVID-19 IN AGRICULTURAL COMMUNITIES

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COVID-19 has spread to rural Australia. Virus hygiene systems on farms must remain in place, and people must be vigilant for the foreseeable future.

- The agricultural workforce is at high risk. This is due to being older on average and due to a shortage of high care local hospital facilities. The risk of dying from the virus is substantially higher for those over 60 - more than 100 times more likely to die compared to under 40's.
 - Based on overseas figures, approximately 5% of infected people end up in ICU, about half of whom will die. Another 15% require hospitalization. The remainder of infected people vary in their illness, ranging from what is described as being similar to a debilitating flu, to a small percentage who exhibit virtually no symptoms.
 - Younger people are not invincible, people under the age of 60 have made up approximately 20% of total deaths overseas.
 - Some risk factors are known, such as older age, males, obesity, and pre-existing health conditions, but many of those who have died were otherwise young and healthy.
- An infected person can look the same as a healthy person. The onset of first symptoms after first infection can take up to 14 days.
 - During the long incubation, the virus is spread into the air and onto nearby surfaces during normal breathing, talking, and touching.
 - As the disease progresses, coughing and sneezing adds to viral spread.
 - Hygiene controls for the virus must assume that anyone may be spreading the virus.
 - Everyone must urgently adapt to prevent spread of the virus by:
 - Considering an isolation strategy to ensure long term distancing and disinfection
 - Avoiding physical proximity to other people
 - Avoiding interactions indoors with others
 - Systematically disinfecting shared surfaces

The numbers

There have been hundreds of confirmed cases in regional areas, and there is no question that the virus is still lingering in communities.

More information: www.health.gov.au

Why it's so contagious

- A COVID-19 infected person spreads the virus before they even know that they have been infected.

Virus transmission

COVID-19 is a 'sticky' virus that survives outside of the body for a long time. It is spread by direct contact, shared air and shared surfaces. Maintaining fresh ventilation, keeping distance from others and disinfecting shared surfaces is key to its control.

State and Federal health authorities recommend keeping a minimum distance of 1.5m, though this figure is simply a practical guide. It is important to avoid shared air and shared surfaces by maximising distance and ventilation, particularly in a workplace setting when workers are near other people for long periods of time.

Protecting vulnerable people

It is up to both individuals and communities to support the protection of vulnerable people. This will vastly reduce the number of deaths due to COVID-19.

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COVID-19 hygiene precautions

1. Hand washing - wash thoroughly all hand surfaces with soap, scrubbing for at least 20 seconds.
2. If you have any symptoms resembling COVID-19, arrange a test. Isolate immediately as a precaution and proceed according to medical advice.
3. If you are unwell with any ailment, isolate yourself so that you don't infect others. This is important whether or not you have the coronavirus, as it is a serious risk factor to contract more than one disease at once.
4. If you cough or sneeze, turn away and direct it into your elbow.
5. No human direct or indirect contact - no shaking hands, passing drinks, or touching common surfaces.
6. Physical distance as far apart as practicable. Health authorities advise at least 1.5 metres, though further is better. This is about controlling the aerosols created by normal breath as well as droplets created by a cough or sneeze. This virus can live suspended in the air for several hours. Maximising fresh ventilation and avoiding shared enclosed spaces is critical.
7. Disinfect everything that is brought into your home or workplace:
 - a) Time - let it sit for a week or more in dry conditions.
 - b) Alcohol - a solution or wipes with at least 70% alcohol.
 - c) Bleach at 1000ppm or 0.1% solution
 - d) Detergent - thorough washing of surfaces with a generous quantity of water and detergent.
8. Surfaces at shops, groceries, handles, fuel pumps, animals and pets, vehicles etc. can all carry the virus. You **cannot** assume that regular cleaning in public places is enough to control this. After visiting the shops, wash or disinfect your hands, clothes, phone etc. before touching anything else.
9. Do not share equipment, tools, pens or pencils, vehicles, workstations etc. Have workers use their own equipment and separate vehicles, and plan to prevent touching any common surfaces.
10. If items are to be shared, they must be disinfected between each use.
11. Do not touch your face - this is how infection can occur. Wearing gloves and/or a mask can help with this.
12. If there are closer proximity situations that cannot be avoided (for example, assisting in a veterinary procedure), consider wearing a P2 /

N95 face mask if available. A face mask does not offer 100% protection, therefore keeping a significant distance and minimising the time in proximity are preferred controls.

About the virus

Symptoms include (in order of prevalence - every case is a different):

- Fever [88%]
- Dry cough [68%]
- Fatigue [38%]
- Sputum [33%] and sore throat [13%]
- Shortness of breath [19%]
- Headache [14%] and joint soreness [15%]
- Chills [11%], nausea and vomiting [5%], nasal congestion [5%], diarrhea [4%]

The disease can progress into more serious symptoms:

- Difficulty breathing
- Persistent pain or pressure in the chest
- Confusion or inability to arouse
- Blue-ish lips or face

When death occurs, it is typically due to respiratory system failure associated with pneumonia.

Longer term health impacts on survivors are not yet known but there is some evidence of lung tissue scarring and organ damage.

Youth under about 30 are much less susceptible, only about 2-3 times the risk of dying than of the flu.

Pregnant women are not known to be at higher risk, though babies are at particular risk due to their immune system immaturity.

Isolating vulnerable populations

People over about 60 and those with pre-existing health conditions are far more vulnerable to this virus. Protecting vulnerable people will vastly reduce the number of deaths due to COVID-19 while it runs its course, or until a vaccine is available (estimated to be up to 18 months).

Preventing COVID-19 at your home, community or agricultural workplace falls into one of two camps. Once you've made the decision, it is important to stick to it. Any compromise can let the fox into the hen house.

STRICTLY ISOLATED PROPERTY	OR	SEPARATED WORKPLACE
<p>Stringent precautions are taken to ensure that everyone at the workplace is completely and strictly isolated from risk of infection in everything they do.</p> <p>Strict isolation means:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> No one on the isolated property can have had contact or physical proximity to any non-isolated people. Supplies are obtained by non-contact delivery and all surfaces of delivered goods are rigorously disinfected, using the COVID-19 hygiene precautions (prev. page). 	OR	<p>Older and vulnerable people and members of their respective households isolate themselves, and do not go anywhere near clearly separated workplace areas on the farm.</p> <p>The workplace areas need to be managed by:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Meticulously practicing all of the COVID-19 hygiene precautions (prev. page). Excluding all people who are vulnerable: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> All people over about 60 People who are unwell for any reason People with pre-existing health conditions or other health vulnerabilities Pregnant women (so that their babies do not catch it if the COVID-19 lingers in their family until childbirth)
<p>Example:</p> <p>Bob is 70 years of age and runs a farm with the help of his son in law, Paul, 35.</p> <p>Both Bob and Paul and everyone in their families strictly isolate themselves on their respective properties in order to prevent infection from the virus. This means zero contact or conversations in person with anyone off the farm, and carefully cleaning and disinfecting any supplies that are delivered to the farm. Bob and Paul plan tasks to keep a significant distance away from any service providers such as vets. This then creates a workplace environment in which Bob and Paul can continue to work without the risk of becoming infected, and even continue to socialise with the isolated grandkids.</p> <p>This strategy allows the farm to carry on and allows Bob to continue to see his extended family. It also</p>	OR	<p>Example:</p> <p>George is 46 years of age with a disease that requires him to take drugs that compromise his immune system, he lives in a farmhouse on a dairy farm with his family.</p> <p>George runs the dairy farm with the help of up to 6 employees. While his employees follow COVID-19 hygiene precautions (above), they are not strictly isolated. If George was to catch COVID-19 he faces an unreasonably high chance of death.</p> <p>George decides that the safest management technique involves appointing his most experienced employee as an interim manager and not enter the dairy and other workplace areas.</p> <p>This allows George to live in strict isolation within the farmhouse. This means zero contact or conversations in person with anyone outside of his household, and carefully cleaning and disinfecting</p>

<p>recognizes the much higher risk to older people should they become infected with COVID-19.</p>		<p>any supplies that are delivered to the farmhouse. Should an employee become infected, George is not working in proximity and cannot become infected.</p> <p>This strategy allows the farm to carry on, and recognises that George is at an unacceptably high risk of death should he be infected with COVID-19.</p>
<p>Benefits</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Comfort in the knowledge that everyone on the farm is healthy and no-one can be unknowingly infected with COVID-19. • Everyone can still run the farm in their existing roles. • Physical socialising can happen between everyone in the isolated group – ie isolation is by everyone on the farm. <p>Challenges</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Requires full cooperation from all people involved, for a long time, strictly adhering to the isolation and hygiene principles. • No physical socialising can happen with people outside the isolated group (only via phone/online) 	<p>OR</p>	<p>Benefits</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Comfort in the knowledge that the most vulnerable people are protected and remain healthy as they cannot be infected with COVID-19. • Lower risk of infection with COVID-19 for the vulnerable people who are excluded from the workplace. <p>Challenges</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Changed roles and responsibilities in the farm business. • Requires full commitment to ‘staying away’ – i.e. isolation must be strictly adhered to by the vulnerable workers and the farm team. • Important to control any weak links, such as farm dogs that could visit other areas of the farm and become a contaminated surface.

References

Asymptomatic spread

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Risk of dying

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Younger people also at risk

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Minimum distance

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