

GENERAL PRINCIPLES FOR WORKING DURING THE COVID-19 PANDEMIC

This information is based on advice provided on the Commonwealth Department of Health website (COVID-19 documents and webinars for allied health professionals).

What is coronavirus (COVID-19)?

COVID-19 is a respiratory illness caused by a new virus. Symptoms include fever, coughing, a sore throat and shortness of breath. The virus can spread from person to person, but good hygiene can prevent infection.

How does coronavirus spread?

The virus can spread from person to person through:

- close contact with an infectious person (including in the 24 hours before they had symptoms).
- contact with droplets from an infected person's cough or sneeze.
- touching objects or surfaces (like doorknobs or tables) that have droplets from an infected person, and then touching your mouth or face.

COVID-19 is a new disease, so there is no existing immunity in our community. This means that COVID-19 could spread widely and quickly.

What settings do these principles apply to?

The aim of these principles is to provide guidance to audiologists who provide hearing health care services to clients in a variety of settings. This includes audiologists who are providing services to clients face to face in their clinics, via a blended model of care (face to face/telehealth), during home visits, in residential aged care facilities and on outreach visits such as to Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities.

How can audiologists minimise risk at this time?

- Do not go to work if you are unwell.
- Before providing face to face services to clients, determine if the client needs to be seen now or whether the service can be delayed or addressed through telehealth using your clinical judgment. For instance, a routine review of a person's hearing could potentially be delayed but if the purpose of a client appointment in a clinic or at their home is to enable them to communicate with others, then that would have a higher priority.
- If the client needs to be seen in person, ascertain that the client is well. Ask if the person has fever, cough, sore throat, shortness of breath, has returned from

overseas in the past 14 days or been in close contact with someone diagnosed with COVID-19 in the past 14 days. If the person has any of these symptoms they should not attend the clinic and may need to seek medical advice.

- Maintain social distancing during appointments where possible and minimise the time spent working more closely with the client. This needs to be facilitated at reception, in the waiting area, in your office and testing areas.
- Implement good hygiene practices and ask your clients to follow similar practices while at your clinic in relation to hand washing, cough etiquette, tissue disposal.
- Watch the Department of Health infection control training video for further details, <https://www.health.gov.au/resources/apps-and-tools/covid-19-infection-control-training>.
- In addition to implementing the usual infection control procedures, you should clean frequently touched surfaces after each client with disinfectant wipes. This includes reception, waiting areas, consultation and testing rooms. The length of time the virus that causes COVID-19 can survive on inanimate surfaces varies depending on factors such as the amount of contaminated body fluid (e.g. respiratory droplets) or soiling present, and environmental temperature and humidity. Coronaviruses can survive on surfaces for many hours or more but are readily inactivated by cleaning and disinfection. It is good practice to routinely clean frequently touched surfaces with detergent solution or detergent/disinfectant wipes and clean general surfaces and fittings when visibly soiled and immediately after any spillage.

If the above strategies are implemented then it should not be necessary to use personal protective equipment (PPE) with clients who are not COVID-19 positive unless it is a procedure where PPE would normally be used. It can be difficult to maintain social distancing during appointments. It is important to try to minimise the time you need to be closer than 1.5m from the client. However, if this is not possible and you are concerned that you may come into contact with droplets from an asymptomatic client then consideration could be given to using PPE such as a mask or gloves in these circumstances. The most likely situations where this may occur are when testing young children (VROA or ABR appointments), working with older clients who may not follow cough etiquette e.g. clients with dementia or impression taking which may trigger a cough reflex.

Most States produce density maps to indicate where COVID-19 cases have been identified. These maps could be used to help you determine the level of risk in working with clients in particularly locations.

Looking after yourself is important, too.

- Do not go to work if you are unwell.
- Your employer is responsible for your health and safety in the workplace. If your employer has issued guidelines for working with clients during the pandemic you should follow that advice.
- If you are working outside of your usual workplace e.g. delivering services in a residential aged care facility (RACF), you should ask for and follow any protocols that have been issued by that facility.
- If you have any concerns about your workplace, you should talk to your supervisor or manager, HR team or a workplace health and safety officer. If you are a member of a union, you could contact your union representative. If the concern relates to professional or ethical conduct it may be appropriate to make a complaint to the

Ethics Review Committee via ethics@audiology.asn.au or 03 9940 3920.

- If you are feeling anxious you could contact the Employee Assistance Program if available through your place of work, or Lifeline or beyondblue.

Further information including links to information from various state and federal health bodies, the Hearing Services Program and more can be found at www.audiology.asn.au. The information is being updated regularly so please check back regularly and keep an eye open for any communications from Audiology Australia via email.

Members are also encouraged to email info@audiology.asn.au or call 03 9940 3900 with any questions or concerns.

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