

COVID-19 FREQUENTLY ASKED QUESTIONS (FAQs) FOR DEFENCE FORCES' PERSONNEL

Introduction

As members of Óglaigh na hÉireann, we are unique in that we are duty-bound to perform tasks and operate in situations that others might wish to avoid. Our primary role is to defend the State and the citizens of Ireland. In the weeks and months ahead, it is likely that the DF will be tasked to support the civil authorities, sometimes going into *harm's way*, to defend the citizens of Ireland against COVID-19. Be assured that the General Staff's first priority is to ensure that our personnel are protected so that we will be ready to provide military capabilities to the State and the Irish people.

All advice and information provided is to ensure DF members are cared for in as practical a way as possible, in line with HSE guidelines along with the obligation of all DF members to ensure that their unit is aware and informed of their condition /status with all supporting documentation provided. This may mean that personnel are NOT to attend at a military medical facility if there is a risk of infection to others, unless otherwise directed. There is an onus on all DF members to provide supporting documentation in relation to their condition /status.

The following is a list of FAQs and recommended advices to be taken to protect yourself so that you can fulfil likely tasks in what are likely be challenging times ahead. Personnel are advised that this is an evolving situation and therefore this document will be updated, as required.

What is a Coronavirus?

Coronaviruses are a large family of viruses found in both animals and humans. Some infect people are known to cause illness ranging from the common cold to more severe diseases such as Middle East Respiratory Syndrome (MERS) and Severe Acute Respiratory Syndrome (SARS).

What is COVID-19?

COVID-19 is the name given by the World Health Organisation (WHO) to the disease caused by the novel coronavirus (2019-nCoV) that originated in China in December 2019. This is a new respiratory illness has not previously been seen in humans. COVID-19 is not from the same family of viruses as the *seasonal* influenza virus. COVID-19 and the flu virus are completely different viruses but cause similar symptoms such as fever or cough.

Outbreaks of novel viral infections among people are always a public health concern, especially when little is known about the virus, how it spreads between people, how severe the resulting diseases are and how to treat them.

What are the symptoms of COVID-19?

Symptoms of COVID-19 are similar to those of regular or seasonal influenza typically causing flu-like symptoms such as fever, cough, shortness of breath and breathing difficulties. In more severe cases, infection can cause pneumonia, severe acute respiratory syndrome, kidney failure and even death.

How is it spread?

COVID-19 is typically spread in sneeze or cough droplets.

You could get the virus if you come into close contact with someone who has the virus and is coughing or sneezing. As it's a new illness, it is not known how easily the virus spreads from person to person. It is not known if someone can spread the virus before they show symptoms.

The virus may only survive a few hours if someone who has it coughs or sneezes on a surface. Simple household disinfectants can destroy the virus on surfaces.

I feel unwell, it may or may not be COVID-19 – what should I do?

Notwithstanding the Provisions of DFR A12, if personnel believe that they have symptoms OR are a close contact¹, they must remain in their home / accommodation and seek medical advice. **In a medical emergency (severe symptoms present) phone directly 112 or 999. Personnel should NOT present at a military medical facility as there is a risk of infection to others.** Notwithstanding the medical advice provided, all DF members are subject to Military Law and are obliged to inform and provide all supporting documentation (including medical certificates as appropriate) to their unit headquarters of their status.

Where can I source information from?

In line with HSE guidelines (**Protect Yourself and Others**), Officers Commanding all military installations are to ensure that all appropriate measures and supports are in place to facilitate the advised preventative measures. During routine working hours military medical facilities may be contacted for advice.

The HSE have issued advices to be followed in relation to dealing with COVID-19 from a general overview, protecting yourself, others, travel advice, self-isolation and limited social interaction <https://www2.hse.ie/conditions/coronavirus/coronavirus.html>. HSE advice is to be followed and if clarification is required there is a HSE contact number, HSE Live phone number 1850241850.

Who should self-isolate?

The HSE sets out the criteria for self-isolation at:

<https://www2.hse.ie/conditions/coronavirus/coronavirus.html>

A public health doctor may recommend self-isolation if they think you may have the COVID-19. This could be before you are tested or while you are awaiting results. You must forward all supporting documentation to your unit for onward transmission to military medical authorities.

What happens if DF personnel need to self-isolate?

Individuals should follow the guidance set out by the HSE and/or their Medical Officer. All DF members are obliged to provide all supporting documentation to their unit HQ. If medical advice is that the person should self-isolate then the Defence Forces should consider the following options:

¹ Spending more than 15 minutes face-to-face within 2 metres of an infected person and or living in the same house or shared accommodation as an infected person.

Arrangements for individuals who are self-isolated

What if I am at home and I become ill?

If you are ill, you should follow HSE and medical advice. If you are medically confirmed as having COVID-19, or that you may have it (if you have not been tested but your doctor suspects they have it) medical authorities will advise on self-isolation. DF members who are directed to self-isolate by the HSE or GP will do so, inform their unit and provide all supporting medical documentation from the HSE or GP that will have attended to them. Based on the documentation Formation MOs can arrange for the personnel concerned to be placed on Special Leave with pay and allowances, in accordance with DFR A11.

What if I contract the COVID-19 virus, what are my leave entitlements?

DFR A11, Para 27 makes provision for Special Leave² with pay and allowances to DF members in relation to Infectious Disease for such period as is considered necessary by the Formation Medical Officer. This Special Leave is appropriate to those who come into contact with a case of infectious disease and are subsequently diagnosed as having the COVID-19 virus. Similarly, personnel who are resident in a district or area where there is an outbreak of infectious disease may be advised to self-isolate.

What happens if it turns out, after the period of self-isolation, that I do not have the virus?

When the recommended period of self-isolation has passed, medical authorities must approve return to work following an imposed period of self-isolation. On return to work all DF members will provide any additional medical documentation that has not already been submitted to Military Authorities.

What if I do *not* have COVID-19 but I have another strain of a flu-related illness?

Ordinary flu or flu-like sickness should be recorded as ordinary certified sick leave and the usual rules governing sick leave will apply.

Initially on medical advice to isolate prior to testing, and the subsequent test result indicating it is not COVID-19, Formation MOs, at their discretion, can arrange for the award of Special Leave with pay and allowances to PDF members in relation to Infectious Disease for a period as is considered necessary.

What if I have returned from an affected area?

DF members are obliged to inform their unit when they return from an affected area and to seek medical advice from the HSE. If self-isolation is deemed necessary by medical authorities all supporting documentation will be forwarded to their unit for onward transmission to military medical authorities.

I am serving overseas and am returning home on leave, do I need to do anything?

DF members serving overseas who return to Ireland on leave from the mission area are obliged by the Mission HQ of UNDOF, UNIFIL and EUTM Mali (at the time of writing) to obtain a

² This leave is NOT Sick Leave

certificate from a military medical doctor stating that they are NOT displaying symptoms of COVID-19, prior to return to the mission area.

What if I have an underlying medical condition?

If an individual considers themselves to be at risk, they should seek medical advice as to what steps should be taken. A local medical risk assessment should be conducted if it is considered that the DF member is in a high risk category.

Someone in my household has been confirmed as having COVID-19, what do I do as a serving DF member?

In the event that there is a confirmed case of COVID-19 in a household, then the DF member, who is a member of that household, must follow the advice of the HSE. If HSE advice is *isolation* or *limited social interaction*, all prescribed measures by the HSE are to be taken with all supporting documentation forwarded to their unit for onward transmission to military medical authorities.

What is the legal basis for processing employee data in relation to COVID-19?

The Defence Forces are obliged to provide a safe workplace, which may include the processing of health data in order to ensure that safety. Articles 6(1)(c) and Articles 9(2)(b) and (g), along with section 53 of the Data Protection Act, 2018 (which permits the processing of special category data for reasons of substantial public interest) will likely be the most appropriate legal basis for processing this data.