

Health and safety considerations for hotel cleaners during Covid-19

Hotel housekeepers are the largest group of workers in the hospitality industry and experience the highest health inequalities compared to other workers in the industry [1–3]. In addition to the physical, and chemical hazards in the workplace, these workers face high psychological stress associated with low control and job insecurity [1,2,4]. Considering the current coronavirus (COVID-19) pandemic, hotel workers, particularly housekeepers are at heightened risk for poor outcomes due to job insecurity and risk of exposure. These risks are amplified because of the current conversation about using hotels as quarantine spaces for those exposed to COVID-19. Though this approach (of providing quarantine spaces) may be warranted, employers are behooved to consider the health and safety of their employees, particularly the housekeepers, during this pandemic.

According to the Centers for Disease Control (CDC), as of the 24th of February 2020 there were a total of 44 183 cases and 544 deaths from COVID-19 [5]. With the increasing number of positive cases of COVID-19 surpassing the thousands, hospitals experience issues of overflow and lack of quarantine spaces [6].

Moreover health-care workers are at the front line of this pandemic. There are rising concerns about bringing the virus home to their loved ones. This is not to be taken lightly given our knowledge of pathogens remaining on scrubs after typical shifts [7] and the COVID-19 virus remaining on surfaces for hours [8].

One possible solution to redress the lack of quarantine spaces and the concerns of health-care providers is to use hotels. Many hotels are considering offering quarantine packages. These measures have already been in place in hotel chains overseas in regions such as Hong Kong and Singapore. Currently, there is talk about such measures taking place in the USA. News reports in Washington State, one of the epicenters of the virus outbreak in the USA, noted that hospitals are ‘overwhelmed with the surge of patients’ forcing officials to consider alternative ways to quarantine exposed individuals such as recreational vehicles (RVs) and hotels [9].

Providing quarantine spaces is a smart business move for the hospitality industry, as it has endured a big financial hit during the pandemic. Quarantine packages will not only be helpful for individuals (e.g. health-care workers) but will also provide some economic relief for the hospitality industry.

As the number of guests plummets, hotel housekeepers will experience a heightened sense of job insecurity as they may be told to not report to work due to decrease in demands. Also, those exposed to COVID-19 may not have paid sick leave and run the risk of losing their jobs due to the need for self-quarantine or caring for a family member who is affected. Many hotel housekeepers lack health insurance [10]. Thus, if affected by the virus, they will face challenges to access care and services. Those who continue to work may experience extra pressure and increased workload, as they need training and extra time to properly disinfect areas.

Employers are obliged to safeguard the health and safety of their workers. Following the recommended hierarchy of controls from the National Institute for Occupational Safety and Health (Figure 1), and the guidelines for employers and businesses from the CDC, there are key steps (Table 1) to protect hotel employees, particularly housekeepers. The most effective level of control is elimination. However, given the many uncertainties associated with COVID-19 the highlighted steps put most emphasis on administrative controls, Personal Protective Equipment (PPE) and engineering controls. Such measures are ought to be considered for all hospitality organizations regardless of being a quarantine site.

The coronavirus pandemic has resulted in several casualties globally, and public, political and economic panic. In providing quarantine spaces for exposed individuals, the hospitality industry may be providing assistance that is beneficial to the public during this crisis, which may also yield some financial relief. It is important to keep the health and safety of hotel workers, particularly the cleaners, at the center of such operations.

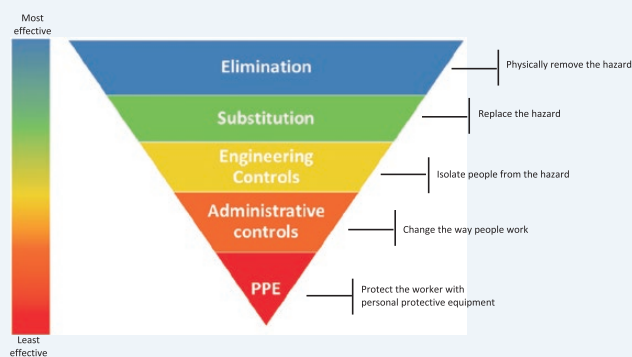


Figure 1. NIOSH's hierarchy of control.

Source: <https://www.cdc.gov/niosh/topics/hierarchy/>.

Table 1. Recommended measures

Hierarchy of controls	Measures to consider
PPE	<p>Provide essential products: At front desk, in common areas (lobby, workers’ breakroom, conference rooms, general bathrooms), & on cleaning carts (e.g.):</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Effective, EPA-approved, disinfecting products - Hand soap - Hand sanitizer - Facial tissues - Disposable nitrile or latex gloves
Administrative controls	<p>Develop or revise policies on sick leave (e.g.):</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Stay home if sick with no retaliation - Compensation for paid sick leave - Allow unpaid sick leave <p>Develop a clear procedure (e.g.):</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - For if/when a guest or employee admits to being positive with COVID-19 - Regarding who to contact (health-care providers) <p>Develop clear communication processes (e.g.):</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Share the various measures taken/underway to protect workers’ health and safety - Have designated locations for communication (e.g. employee breakroom) <p>Develop zero tolerance policy (e.g.):</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Discrimination against previously treated individuals - Discrimination against race/ethnicity <p>Consider decreasing workload (i.e. # of rooms)</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Provide more time for workers to disinfect cleaning materials <p>Revise guest check-in processes (e.g.):</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Consider a scanning tool to prevent touching guests’ ID - Disinfect key cards/keys before handing to guests and after they are returned - Disinfect computer equipment between uses - If necessary to touch IDs, use gloves - Disinfect pens and other writing utensils that are frequently touched - Disinfect surfaces that are frequently touched <p>Revise cleaning processes (e.g.):</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Cleaning/washing every item of linen (including duvet) - Consider necessary frequency for disinfecting areas and materials <p>Promote proper practices (e.g.):</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Use posters to share information on: Proper hand washing^a - Coughing measures^a <p>Train/educate workers (e.g.):</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Signs and symptoms of COVID-19 - Proper handling of linens and materials - Disinfect hampers and carts - Disinfect frequently touched areas - Wash hands with soap and water for 20 s - Wash hands frequently - If unable to wash hands, use hand sanitizer

Table 1. Continued

Hierarchy of controls	Measures to consider
Engineering controls	<p>Proper ventilation</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - In individual rooms - In entire establishment

^aThese measures are not meant to be exhaustive.

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