

Coronavirus – Implications for Employee Insured Benefits

Novel Coronavirus (COVID-19) is a rapidly evolving public health emergency. At the time of writing, confirmed cases are present in almost 90 countries, including Ireland, with almost 100,000 known cases globally. Based on recent reports from multiple agencies including the World Health Organisation, the virus may soon become a pandemic.

The aim of this paper is to help employers answer potential queries from their employees in relation to their insured benefits.

From the outset, we would note that clear communication is key – there are already significant levels of misinformation online which can lead to panic rather than increasing preparedness. Read our whitepaper '[Keeping Employees Resilient During a Global Infection Outbreak](#)' for more information on this.

Employers can help employees by:

- Educating employees about preventative measures
 - Reminding employees of proper hand and cough hygiene and the use of hand sanitiser where appropriate
- Urging employees to stay home if feeling ill and providing details of available supports
 - Enabling use of telemedicine (such as digital doctors or nurse lines) instead of doctor, urgent care or emergency department visits
- Making flexible work arrangements available where possible
 - Co-ordinating travel as limitations evolve
- Communicating sound information to counteract fear and stigma
 - Having clear policies and referring individuals to responsible, relevant sources of information

Health Insurance & Support Services

Specifically focusing on employee benefits, employees should be reminded of support services that are in place such as digital doctors, GP/nurse advice lines, and Employee Assistance Programmes. All three of the domestic healthcare insurers – Irish Life Health, Laya and Vhi – provide access to these services (although the level of coverage may vary by plan type).



For claims relating to COVID-19 within Ireland, all three health insurers have confirmed that there are no restrictions to their cover. As with any health-related illness where treatment is deemed medically necessary, members will be covered in line with their health insurance scheme and level of cover.

Health Insurance – Overseas Travel

If employees (or their dependants) have travelled overseas and need to seek emergency medical treatment while abroad, they may be covered under their health insurance policy for a benefit of up to €100,000, plus repatriation expenses of up to €2,000,000. However, this is dependent on the specific rules of their health insurance plan along with each insurer's terms and conditions.

Cover will **not** be provided if the individual has chosen to travel to an area where the advice from the Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade (DFA) is to avoid non-essential travel. (If an individual travels to an area before the DFA issues a notice to avoid non-essential travel, cover will be provided as outlined above.)

Leisure Travel Insurance

In contrast to the above, the situation with leisure travel insurance varies quite significantly. Some providers will provide catastrophe and cancellation cover where the DFA has advised against non-essential travel. However, other providers do not provide cancellation cover if the DFA issues a notice to avoid non-essential travel. In addition, some have specific exclusions for any claims whatsoever arising due to an epidemic or pandemic.

Given the broad range of positions, employees should contact their insurer directly to check cover, if relevant. (It's also worth noting that, where a family policy is in place, some insurers may require that the policyholder is in the travelling party for the insurance cover to apply.)

At the date of this note, we are unaware of any insurer that would

cover a cancellation claim as a result of the individual simply choosing not to travel.

Business Travel Insurance

From the insurers we have contacted, business travel insurance is more likely to provide cancellation and catastrophe cover without question where the DFA (or equivalent) has issued a non-essential travel directive. However, business travel insurers are less inclined to cover claims where the employees are simply disinclined to cover.

As with leisure travel insurance, it's worth reading the small print on this one, in conjunction with any decisions you may be making on curtailing business travel.

Sick Leave, Disability Insurance and Death Cover

If employees need to take time off due to illness or a requirement to self-isolate, they are entitled to apply for Illness Benefit from the Department of Employment Affairs and Social Protection (subject to meeting the social contribution requirements) and/or a means tested Supplementary Welfare Allowance. These would be in addition to any short term sickness benefits from the employer.

In the event of an individual going on long term sick leave, all of the life insurers operating in the Irish market have confirmed that there are no exclusions for COVID-19, even if it is declared a pandemic. In the unfortunate event of an individual contracting COVID-19 and passing away as a result, there would also be no exclusions on group life assurance policies.

If an employee needs to take time off to care for a dependant person who contracts COVID-19, this may be considered force majeure leave, if no alternative leave arrangements are available.

All of the above is based on our research as of the date of writing (5 March 2020).

Useful Resources

HSE:
<https://www2.hse.ie/conditions/coronavirus/coronavirus.html> or call 1850 24 1850

World Health Organisation:
<https://www.who.int/emergencies/diseases/novel-coronavirus-2019>

Health Protection Surveillance Centre:
<https://www.hpsc.ie/a-z/respiratory/coronavirus/novelcoronavirus/>

Contact Us

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