

COVID-19 Vaccinations in the Workplace: Employers Guide

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COVID-19 vaccinations are being rolled out for all New Zealanders from now into 2022 based on the Government's identification of those most at risk.

This guide aims to help you understand what your obligations are when it comes to vaccinations for your staff, based on employment law and health and safety.

COVID-19 was the initial virus; however, this has mutated into the COVID Delta variant. This new virus is far more contagious and is transported in the atmosphere as an aerosol. Aerosols allow the virus to remain airborne and can travel great lengths from the host. Mask wearing and maintaining good social distancing will reduce the aerosols' ability to be inhaled by other people.

The NZ Government has just announced a new regime for managing COVID. It will use a "Traffic Light" system. There will be three colours in play: red, orange, and green. Each colour broadly represents different levels of transmission within the community. [Click here for more information.](#)

Health and safety at work

Your obligations under the Health and Safety at Work Act means you need to do everything you can to reduce the risk to the health and safety of your people. You must continue to implement your Alert Level Safety Plans plus encourage good personnel hygiene, washing of hands and coughing and sneezing protocols.

With COVID-19 that means doing as much as is reasonably practical to reduce its spread, just as you would with the flu or any other infectious disease.

This usually includes staying home when sick, having good hygiene practices in the workplace and providing people with information on public health orders, Alert Levels 1 to 4, and vaccinations to enable them to make an informed choice.



Vaccinations are not mandatory and under New Zealand's Bill of Rights Act 1990 people have the right to refuse them.

What should you do?

You should have good workplace procedures in place if one of your people has been at risk of contracting COVID-19, has required a test, or has been confirmed as having COVID-19.

This will mean following your Business Continuity Plan or Business Interruption Policy, and adhering to [Government guidelines detailed here](#).

What does best practice look like?

- Provide COVID-19 training and awareness programmes
- Maintain personal hygiene, social distancing and use the NZ COVID Tracer App
- Encourage staff (and their families) to get vaccinated
- If possible, consider providing on-site vaccinations
- Encourage employees to inform you if they have been vaccinated
- Pay for their vaccination time off
- Accommodate those workers who cannot or will not get vaccinated in a sensible and practicable manner
- Encourage COVID-19 jabs as an annual event like the flu
- Review your Safety Plans for Alert Levels 1 - 4.

Testing, COVID-19 'passports' and business travel

The Government funded nasal swab testing is available free of charge whether your people have symptoms or not and regardless of your citizenship, immigration status, nationality, or level of medical insurance.

Workplaces can also consider private saliva testing as an early warning option, which is easier to administer with results available faster, but it is at their own cost and again would be on a voluntary basis.

Each country can call a lock down at any time and all travelers must abide by those sanctions and conditions. The EMA Vaccination Policy outlines these scenarios - [visit the EMA website](#).

Vaccine passports are not in effect now but may become relevant if your people travel overseas for work. At the moment, this is the Government's advice about getting a [pre-departure COVID-19 test](#).

Sending staff overseas for work

Sending staff overseas to work does not reduce or alter an employer's obligations under the Health and Safety at Work Act 2015. Employers would need to have undertaken a risk assessment, identified hazards, and put in place controls.

This includes:

- The travel destination
- The destination's COVID-19 status and applicable local controls
- What information has been given to employees to prevent and mitigate known risks and hazards
- What protocols to follow if they become infected. Local and NZ contact numbers/emails (family / work)
- What precautions have been taken prior to travel (e.g., provision of any PPE equipment, masks)
- What arrangements have been considered if the employee becomes ill or is hospitalised
- Credit facilities and payments for medical care
- Have local assistance contacts been identified before departure and communicated to employees
- Consideration of emergency travel back to NZ
- Liability for any costs related to isolation/quarantine requirements at the destination, but also upon returning to New Zealand.



Privacy

If you ask your people at the pre-employment stage – which you can do – or existing employees if they have had the COVID-19 vaccine, you must keep this information private. You cannot discriminate against people because of their response. They can choose not to answer that question.

Privacy law must be taken into account if you are considering keeping a vaccine register.

For more on your responsibilities under the Privacy Act 2020 go to [Office of the Privacy Commissioner | Home](#)

Who pays and what support is available during testing?

In the first instance, you need to have an open conversation with your staff member about their circumstances and come to an agreement in good faith. This may be around what kind of leave they could use, or a contract variation if they cannot work from home.

This needs to be considered in conjunction with Government support that is available to you for your people who are in self-isolation and awaiting a test result. There are several options, including:

- [Resurgence Support Payment](#) – for businesses at Alert Level 2 or above for seven or more consecutive days (subject to Government approval of the scheme with each Alert Level change).
- [COVID-19 Short-Term Absence Payment](#) – for you to help pay your people who cannot work from home while waiting for a test result.
- [COVID-19 Leave Support Scheme](#) – for you to help pay your people who need to self-isolate and cannot work from home.





All you need to know from EMA Legal

No jab no job?

One of the hottest topics in relation to the COVID-19 vaccination is the ability of an employer to decline an offer of employment or to terminate existing employment based on the applicant or employee's refusal to have the vaccination (and/or advise whether they have had it). While there is ample speculation floating around, what are the facts and what is the current legal position in New Zealand?

There are two clear groups of employees impacted:

- Those covered by the Governments' mandatory vaccinations order (COVID-19 Public Health Response Vaccinations Order 2021) e.g., a Public Health Order; and
- All other employees.

EMA Legal has created checklists for employers regarding terminating employment of unvaccinated employees whose work is covered by the Public Health Order and for those whose work is not. These checklists are available on [EMA's website](#).

Vaccination is classed as a form of medical treatment for which all New Zealand citizens, residents and visitors have the right to decline. This is provided for in section 11 of the Bill of Rights Act 1990. However, this does not result in an employee being immune from the consequences of their decision to decline medical treatment. While an employer cannot compel an employee to be vaccinated, as a last resort you may dismiss an employee who refuses in particular circumstances having exhausted all alternative options. Such circumstances include where the employee's role is required to be undertaken by a vaccinated person under a Public Health Order or where, following a robust health and safety risk assessment, and in line with a vaccination policy, an employer determines a role can only be undertaken by a vaccinated person.

If an employee wishes not to declare their vaccination status, employers are within their rights to assume the person is unvaccinated and proceed on that basis.

For pre-employment

An employer may choose to require that new applicants provide proof of vaccination prior to offering employment. However, this must:

- Be relevant to the role being applied for (e.g., as a legitimate health and safety risk); and
- Is subject to consideration of whether such a requirement may unlawfully discriminate against someone who declines vaccination on particular grounds provided for under section 21 of the Human Rights Act 1993.



Grounds under section 21 may include but not be limited to sex (which includes pregnancy) religious belief, ethical belief, and/or disability. There is one exception to this question of discrimination. Namely, whether a decision to proceed to hire despite a declined request for vaccination (or evidence of) would pose an unreasonable risk to the employers operations. As part of this assessment, an employer must also consider whether a refusal to be vaccinated (or provide evidence of vaccination) will pose a health and safety risk that the employer cannot reasonably accommodate. If the answer is that they cannot, then it may be possible to legally discriminate in accordance with the Human Rights Act 1993. However, if an employer can take reasonable measures to reduce the risk of the degree of harm to a “normal” level, it is unlikely that this will meet the required threshold to permit discrimination in these circumstances. Of course, what is a “normal” level will be open for debate to a degree.

While this may seem like an 'easy' exception to apply, in reality this will require a detailed health and safety assessment and it is likely that a majority of New Zealand employers will not meet this threshold. The concept of an unacceptable risk is to be measured objectively, and this is more likely to fit the category of an employer who operates almost entirely in a COVID-19 high risk sector which presents an imminent risk of harm (for example, aged care facilities), and even in these categories, we do not have clear case law or legislation on this yet.

The summary for new appointments is this: subject to an assessment of relevance to the role and any risk as to discrimination as set out above, an employer may be able to decline to hire a new employee if employment is subject to proof of vaccination. If there is a possible issue of discrimination, an employer may still be able to proceed with their decision, subject to an assessment as to whether hiring the new applicant will pose an unacceptable health and safety risk, which cannot be reasonably accommodated. This will always require a case-by-case assessment.

EMA Legal has developed pre-employment templates/materials, employment agreements and policy documents with COVID-19 clauses for business. These are available on EMA's website.



For existing employees

For people already employed, it is extremely unlikely that they can have their employment altered or terminated for declining vaccination due to the legal protections that exist in terms of employment law.

Employers have legislative obligations under the Health and Safety at Work Act 2015 as PCBU to ensure they take steps to mitigate all known health and safety risks in the workplace. COVID-19 is a known health and safety risk. To ensure compliance with these obligations, employers are required to look at what reasonably practicable steps they need to take to ensure a healthy and safe workplace.

Work Covered by Public Health Order:

If all or part of an employer's workforce is covered by the Public Health Order, you will have a sound legal basis for requiring your employees to be vaccinated to continue to perform work covered by the Order.

It is crucial to engage with your staff, and you must still undertake a full consultation process, which will include consulting with your employees on:

- Which roles you consider to be covered by the Order and why
- How the business will deal with employees who refuse to or cannot get vaccinated, including what redeployment options may be available, and ultimately whether they should be dismissed if they continue to decline to get vaccinated.

Work Not Covered by Public Health Order:

There is no specific case law relating to the dismissal of employees who are not subject to a Public Health Order, and this has created a grey area in the law.

However, where the government mandates that the public will need to show proof of vaccination CVC's (Covid Vaccination Certificates), e.g. hospitality, gatherings, gyms, close contacts, then all staff of that business will need to be vaccinated. For those who decline to get vaccinated and don't have a medical exemption, an employer can give the employee four weeks' notice of termination. This will give the employee time to reconsider their vaccination status. Where an employee gets vaccinated during the notice period the termination notice will discontinue.

WorkSafe state on their website that employers can also require other work (e.g., work not subject to a Public Health Order) to be done by a vaccinated employee, if a risk assessment identifies this is necessary for work health and safety purposes. That may be the case where the nature of the work itself raises the risk of COVID-19 infection and transmission above the risk faced outside work.

An employer's focus in the risk assessment must be on the role – the work being done – rather than the individual performing the role. You also need to consider other controls and identify any further infectious disease controls you and your employees can put in place to reduce the risk (e.g., COVID-19 testing regime).

In our view, following a robust health and safety risk assessment and/or depending on client demands, an employer can require certain roles/duties/tasks only be performed by a vaccinated person (mandatory vaccination). Where a person in such a role refuses to be or cannot be vaccinated an employer needs to look at all alternatives and possible redeployment prior to considering the last resort of termination of employment.

Implementing mandatory vaccination for certain roles is a complex issue for employers and each workplace will need to undertake its own risk assessments specific to particular roles. Further, employers whose clients are demanding only vaccinated individuals come on site for example, may also be able to consider redeploying, retraining and/or dismissing an unvaccinated employee after following a full and proper process.

However, recently the Ministry of Health published its [**Public Health Response \(Vaccinations\) Order**](#). This requires all workers covered by the Order: MIQ/Customs/Border to be vaccinated to continue to work at those facilities. This Order overrides all other law including the Employment Relations Act.

The question on everyone's mind is whether the position is the same for particular categories of employer who work in high-risk sectors. In these sectors there may be cases to be made if the [health and safety risks are severe](#). In such circumstances it may be possible for an employer to consider taking serious action if an employee is not vaccinated or refuses to provide such information, and there is no other alternative other than to consider redeployment, altering terms of employment, or ultimately, termination.

To add a further complication, as the Ministry of Innovation, Business and Employment (MBIE) has recently stated on its Employment New Zealand website, "workers do not have to tell their employer if they have been vaccinated or why they are unable or choose not to be vaccinated". This is correct. In reality, an employee cannot be forced to disclose such information, and such information is private and is subject to the Privacy Act 2020 – which comes with its own considerations for employers. This of course adds a further complication as to whether an employer can then proceed to take any action without knowing for sure whether someone has been vaccinated, where they refuse to provide such information. In these circumstances there may be an ability for an employer to act on the assumption that an employee is not vaccinated, however this must be advised to the employee and handled carefully (ideally with professional advice).

In general, termination of employment for refusing to be vaccinated is at high risk of being found to be an unjustified dismissal. This being said, it may be possible to alter someone's terms of employment by redeploying them into another role on a temporary or permanent basis. This would require a fair consultation process and current law would most likely require their agreement. Further, such changes may not be appropriate in many circumstances – again, this will be a case-by-case situation, which will require undertaking a thorough health and safety risk assessment and should be considered with professional advice.



Considerations and suggestions

When assessing the potential impact of the above issues on your business, our suggestion is to start with these 'big picture' considerations:

- What in reality has or will change the risk profile of a particular role in your business, post the COVID-19 vaccination roll out?
- How does the COVID-19 vaccine rollout compare with the influenza vaccination programme in New Zealand (for which there is also no ability to enforce vaccination or require disclosure of the same, and from which hundreds of people die from every year)?
- What practical and proactive steps can you take now to get ahead of the issues?
- Start engaging with staff, clients, suppliers and contractors now.

It is important to realise that the rollout of the COVID-19 vaccine does not alter anything in current New Zealand employment law. It is equally important to take stock of the fact that many New Zealand businesses have continued to operate without a vaccine over the past year. This is a relevant consideration in any case to be made that an applicant/employee may have their employment status altered for declining to be vaccinated or provide proof of vaccination.

It will be very easy for some employers to 'jump the gun' on these issues, and many employers may be under the mistaken impression they can unilaterally alter existing employment and reshape a job on the concept of the unreasonable and/or unacceptable "risk", without having a clear understanding of what "risk" means in this context and the threshold to be met. Being too quick to take such action could mean a very costly personal grievance win for an employee in the Employment Relations Authority. Equally, a misstep in the hiring process could mean a successful claim in the Human Rights Review Tribunal for a breach of the Human Rights Act on the basis of unlawful discrimination.

We are yet to see case law (and/or legislation) which provides clear guidance as to the ability to alter the terms of someone's employment based on a rejected vaccination request/instruction (or information request), let alone termination of employment on this basis.

In terms of the more specific issues with particular roles, we suggest ensuring that you are clear on what your business needs in respect of vaccination, what health and safety risks are relevant to your business and/or roles within your business (and the severity of these), and then discussing this with a professional advisor to see what realistic options may be available to you, and how to implement these.

As part of that conversation, some of the questions for discussion may include:

- Whether a job can be reshaped with an employee's agreement so that the duties being undertaken reduce any unacceptable risk
- Whether redeployment is an option for certain employees
- Whether an employee can temporarily work from an alternative location e.g., home
- Whether termination may be possible
- How to prepare and implement the required documents for preemployment requiring proof of vaccination
- For those who will be vaccinated - how will the business address the five-week period between the initial injection of the vaccine and immunity? (e.g., will that person be expected/able to work).

To discuss any of the above in more detail and/or concerns you may have regarding how COVID-19 impacts your business, please contact the Legal Team on 09 367 0994, or alternatively our AdviceLine on 0800 300 362.

Frequently asked questions:

Question	Answer/opinion
Are all employees required to be vaccinated?	No, except those covered by any relevant Public Health Order or arguably where a health and safety risk assessment and/or client requirements necessitate the role be undertaken by a vaccinated person. The Bill of Rights Act 1990 gives individuals the right to decline medical treatments and vaccinations are deemed medical treatments. Where Government indicates a CVC for customers then all employees of that business will need to be vaccinated. On completion of a risk assessment an employer may require staff in certain roles to be vaccinated. However, this does not provide protection to an employee of the consequences of refusing to be vaccinated where a role requires a vaccinated person to preform it. Visit www.covid19.govt.nz for more information.
Is it recommended that employees are vaccinated?	The Government has recommended that everyone is vaccinated who can be, and EMA along with Business New Zealand and its Network Partners fully support this position.
Who pays for the vaccination?	The Government is paying for all COVID-19 vaccinations.
Are employers required to put in place other preventative measures for non-vaccinated employees?	Yes, as per any Public Health Order from Alert Level 1- 4. In addition, employers are required under the Health and Safety at Work Act 2015 to take all reasonable and practicable steps to ensure the health and safety of employees at work. What such steps may look like depends on the particular circumstances and must be assessed on a case-by-case basis.
In a case of workers being vaccinated and another Alert Level 3 is applied, would restrictions apply to those workers/ workplaces?	Yes, because the Alert Levels are Regulations which must be adhered to within workplaces.
Does an employer need to develop a COVID-19 vaccination policy?	No. There is no requirement or need to create a policy as the pandemic and vaccinations are a general public health issue not a workplace or work-related issue. However, it is strongly recommended that employers do have a COVID-19 vaccination policy and communicate clear expectations to employees regarding required levels of hygiene in the workplace and staying home if unwell. Any policy must reference any mandated vaccination requires e.g. CVC"s or following a risk assessment.
Can an employer organise for vaccinations to be given at a workplace?	If the Minister of Health agrees to workplace-based vaccinations, large employers may be able to arrange this.
What would be a nominal time required to have off to undertake a vaccination procedure?	There is no prescribed time to give a vaccination, however given travel times and compulsory 30 min rest following the vaccine, it would be prudent to expect 2-3 hours away from work.
Do employers pay for time off while employees have their vaccinations?	Yes.
What information is available to employers and employees regarding the vaccine programme?	The most factual and up-to-date information can be found at www.covid19.govt.nz or www.health.govt.nz .

Is an employer required to accommodate a non-vaccinated employee by providing other work or duties?	Yes, as with any other condition(s). Employers are required to provide accommodations to work, work tasks and work times that are fair and reasonable, unless such accommodations cause unreasonable disruption to the employer (e.g., causing excessive cost, operational disadvantages).
What might constitute a safety critical job requiring an employee to be vaccinated or highly recommended to do so?	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Someone who works in a known COVID-19 environment and is in close contact with other persons (e.g., border-related jobs or in the health sector.) 2. Someone who works with others at high-risk, e.g., elderly in rest homes or those who are compromised or immune deficient.
Can an employer direct/require a staff member to be vaccinated?	Yes, in certain circumstances e.g. PHO, CVC or following risk assessments.
Is there an optimal number (%) of staff to be vaccinated?	No, not within a workplace but nationally the Government is encouraging everyone to be vaccinated towards herd immunity.
Can I enquire as to an employee's vaccination status?	Yes, this is required by Government policy where public are required to show proof of vaccination status. However the employee has no obligation to inform you one way or another. An employer may respond to a non-disclosure position by assuming the employee has not been vaccinated and therefore require them to use/wear additional PPE e.g., a face mask while working if they are working in a high-risk area.
Would an employer be required to inform other staff if another staff member is not vaccinated?	No, this would be a breach of the Privacy Act 2020 unless you have consent from that individual to do so.
Could being vaccinated form part of an offer of employment 'subject to being vaccinated'?	Yes, but an employer needs to have a valid reason/rationale to warrant such condition (e.g. a health-sensitive workplace), as otherwise it may conflict with the Human Rights Act 1993.
If an employee chooses not to be vaccinated based on medical/religious grounds, is an employer required to make note of this situation?	There is no legal reason to do so and there is no legal requirement for the employee to inform the employer. However, an employer must take the usual precautions to ensure staff safety.
Does an employer need to keep a register of vaccinated and non-vaccinated staff?	In general, no. However, there is a legal requirement to do so where vaccination is required to perform a roll. e.g. work under PHO, CVC and or following Risk Assessment. This may become more important if Vaccination Certificates are required or your clients want proof your employees are vaccinated.
Do employers need or are they required to provide training and information regarding the public roll out of vaccines?	There is no legal requirement, however it is strongly recommended that employers and health and safety representatives make information available to their staff. Visit www.covid.19.govt.nz or www.health.govt.nz .

If an employee has a rare adverse reaction to the vaccine requiring more time off, how would an employer account for that time?	This would be taken as normal sick leave as the criteria for that leave is met.
Can an employer stop someone who does not believe in the vaccination from spreading their messages within the workplace?	Yes. While employers cannot generally restrict an employee's freedom of speech (and opinion), such opinion must not jeopardise the employer's reputation and/or 'state of peace' in the workplace. The employer can set expectations and standards regarding acceptable behaviours, lawfully and reasonably instruct an employee not to 'broadcast' such opinion in a way that may disrupt the workplace.
Can employees choose where they are vaccinated or would the closest to work be the default choice?	An employer could suggest and encourage their employees to use a local provider, however, the employee has the right to choose where they get vaccinated.
Can employees have both the winter flu jab at the same time as the COVID-19 vaccination?	No. medical advice indicates that the two vaccines must not be given together at the same time.
Would staff required to travel overseas be required to be vaccinated before they leave or before they return from overseas?	Vaccination passports are being explored around the world. These are not in place at this time and much work needs to be completed before we see any such provisions. However, in accordance with their health and safety obligations under the Health and Safety Act 2015, employers may direct employees not to travel overseas if this would enhance the risk of infection.
Can an employer provide on-site saliva testing for staff?	Yes. This is cheaper and less invasive than a nasal swab, easier to administer and results are available faster. Providers are ready to go, however the Government is still requiring more testing and validation of the process. Saliva testing is used around the world and is currently available privately in New Zealand.
Who should not get vaccinated?	All those who are willing and medically able should be vaccinated. This will now include those 12- 16 years. There is no cost for this group, and they are not mandatory. They will be able to be given at the same time as their parents.
Is it safe to get vaccinated if I have COVID-19?	It is recommended that people wait until they are symptom free before getting vaccinated. Find out more at www.covid19.govt.nz or www.health.govt.nz .
How long before the vaccines take effect?	Protection begins following the first jab however full protection is only achieved after the final jab, and usually within one month following the vaccine.
Do employees get 'proof' that they have been vaccinated and can employers ask to see it?	Yes, they receive a confirmation of vaccination (first and second dose) detailing date and time. Staff receive appointment notifications which verify their appointment time and place.



This document will be updated regularly as new and updated information comes to hand. It is always recommended that advice is sought for specific circumstances.

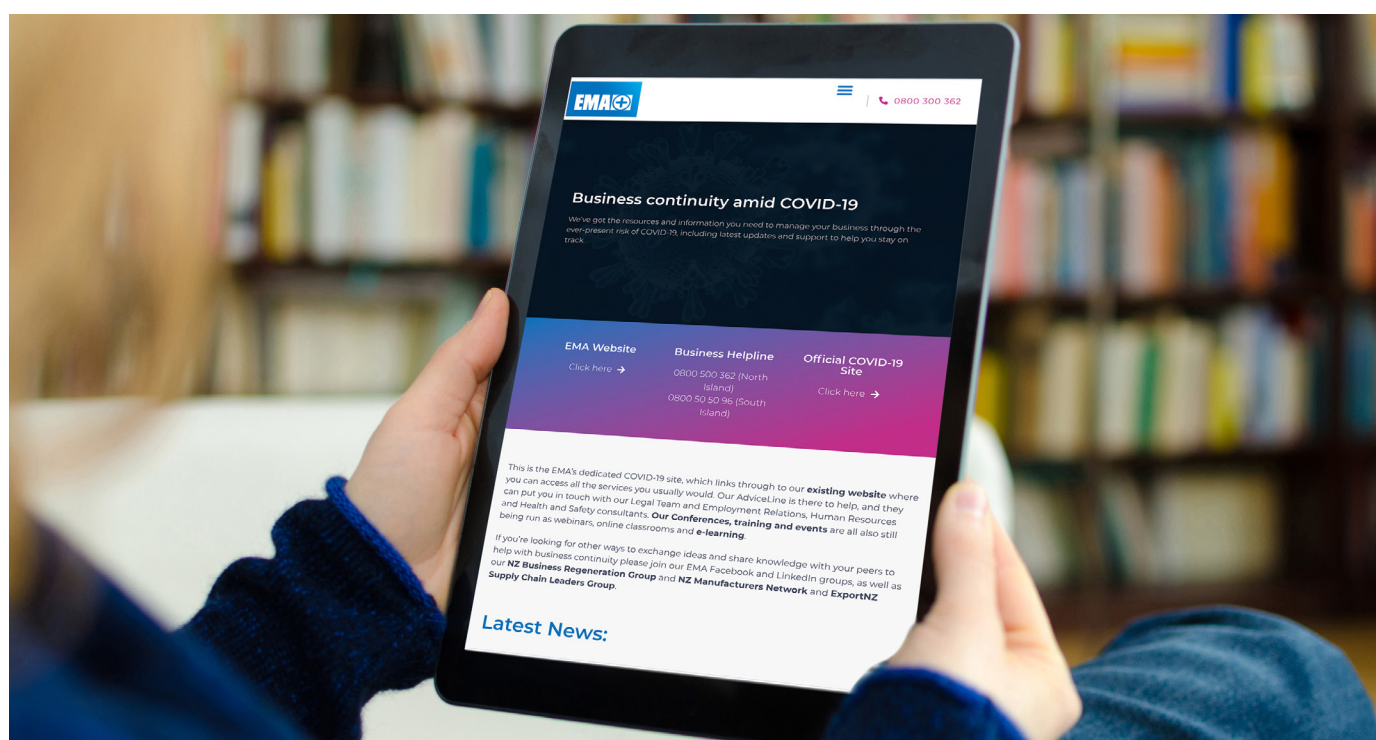
Have more COVID-19 related questions?

We've got the resources and information you need to manage your business through the ever-present risk of COVID-19, including latest updates and support to help you stay on track.

- News & Updates
- Web Series
- Resource packs and checklists.

[Visit covid19.ema.co.nz for more](https://covid19.ema.co.nz)

If you're looking for other ways to exchange ideas and share knowledge with your peers to help with business continuity, please join our EMA Facebook and LinkedIn groups, as well as our **NZ Business Regeneration Group** and **NZ Manufacturers Network** and **ExportNZ Supply Chain Leaders Group**.



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The EMA has been supporting employers for over 134 years and we know what it takes to create a strong business that lasts.

Our services include:

- Legal and consulting
- Advocacy and networking
- Exporting and manufacturing
- Payroll
- Health and safety
- Learning and development.



Please do not hesitate to contact our AdviceLine on 0800 300 362 and get in contact with our human resources and employment law experts if you need any further information, we are here to help.

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