Health and Safety

Taking control of the COVID-19 pandemic

It is vital that we all take personal responsibility when implementing precautions to limit the spread of this coronavirus. This involves following the most recent advice of the HSE, with particular emphasis on social distancing, limiting our social interactions and good hand washing (see www.hse.ie).

For farm families, farm staff and persons entering the farm, the additional challenge is to maintain health and safety while continuing with farming operations.

It is important to note that if farm family members have any medical concerns or are displaying symptoms of COVID-19, they should phone their local GP.

Maintain perspective

Many of us can feel overwhelmed by concerns about coronavirus and the number of new cases diagnosed each day. However, it is important that we maintain a balanced perspective on the situation and take control of our own actions.

Professor Paul Fearon, Medical Director, St Patrick’s Mental Health Service, has outlined five strategies we can use to reduce the anxiety associated with the coronavirus:

• Follow only reliable information – be sure of the facts.
• Don’t forget the basics: the importance of regular, thorough hand washing and good respiratory hygiene – covering our mouths and noses and bent elbows or tissues when we cough or sneeze – in slowing the spread of viruses.
• Deflect your anxiety: consider talking to family, friends or work colleagues about your shared worries and concerns.
• Use your experience and knowledge: you may already have a range of strategies to cope with anxiety. For example, going for a walk may assist with thinking out matters.
• Stop and do a reality check: If you are constantly worried about contracting the coronavirus think it through logically. Then, looking at all the evidence calmly, ask yourself if there are any realistic reasons to suppose you are at an increased risk at the moment.

Children and young people

With schools closed and children at home, it is vital that farming families lead by example and keep their children safe. Farms are workplaces and, of course, homes too. Children are naturally eager to spend time with adults in the absence of school pals.

When online classes and daily homework are completed for the day, it’s natural for children on farms to want to get outside and help with the many jobs that need doing.

Young children should never be allowed unsupervised access to the farmyard and under no circumstances should they be allowed anywhere near working machinery.

Other dangerous areas such as slurry pits, silage pits, grain stores and chemical stores should be off limits at all times. The solution lies in providing safe play for your children and discussing safety positively in simple terms with children on a daily basis.

Children under 14 should never be allowed to drive a tractor or any self-propelled machine on the farm. Only children aged 14 and over should be allowed to operate a tractor under adult supervision and in line with the limitations outlined in the HSA Code of Practice for Childhood Safety (Available at: www.hsa.ie).

Older people

Older people (aged 70+) are required to cocoon from other members of the community, particularly from younger people who could be carriers of the COVID-19.

Due to age and the increased likelihood of underlying medical conditions, older people are more likely to develop severe illness due to this virus.

Cocooning involves separation from family and friends, loss of freedom, uncertainty over health status and boredom.

Making sure self-care is a priority is crucial for the period of this emergency. A positive attitude to self-care involves developing a good daily sleep routine as well as minimising alcohol and other treats. These habits contribute to maintaining a healthy immune system.

Regular exercise is vital for everyone and may be done in one’s home, outdoors, close to the farmhouse. Accompanying an older person exercising (with appropriate distancing) or helping keep up-to-date with a family
Teagasc telephone helplines for farmers

A Teagasc telephone helpline, which was set up to assist farmers with queries relating to COVID-19, was announced by Professor Tom Kelly, Teagasc Director of Knowledge Transfer in March: “Teagasc have put in place a dedicated helpline for farmers to get advice on the range of issues they may face as they continue to do their essential work in maintaining the food supply chain. This helpline is open to all farmers for a range of farming issues they face on a day-to-day basis.”

The information line phone number is +353 76 1113533 and will be open from 9.30am to 12.30pm and from 2pm to 5pm Monday to Friday.

As usual, the Teagasc website (www.teagasc.ie) is a prime source of information on the full range of issues facing farm businesses. Teagasc clients should continue to use advisors mobiles and office numbers.

Labour database
Teagasc has also set up a regional farm labour database to link farm families, where a farmer or a farm worker becomes ill with COVID-19, with an available relief worker. This done in collaboration with the Farm Relief Services (FRS) and the support of the IFA and ICMSA.

Thomas Curran, manager of the Teagasc Cork west advisory region said: “If you are available to work on farms to assist fellow farmers, please ring the designated Teagasc regional number in the table below, or your local Teagasc office. You will be registered on the Teagasc regional labour database. With your permission, your details will be passed to FRS and they will contact you in the event of a farmer needing assistance.”

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Teagasc Region</th>
<th>Office</th>
<th>Contact Number</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Cork West</td>
<td>Skibbereen</td>
<td>029-21888</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Cork East</td>
<td>Midleton</td>
<td>021-4631888</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Kerry Limerick</td>
<td>Killarney</td>
<td>087-3826808</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Tipperary</td>
<td>Thurles</td>
<td>0504-21777</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Kilkenny Waterford</td>
<td>Dungarvan</td>
<td>058-41211</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Carlow Wicklow Wexford</td>
<td>Johnstown Castle</td>
<td>053-9171350</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Dublin Meath Louth Laois Kildare</td>
<td>Naas</td>
<td>045-879203</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Offaly Westmeath Cavan Monaghan</td>
<td>Tullamore</td>
<td>057-9321405</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Roscommon Longford</td>
<td>Roscommon</td>
<td>090-6626166</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Clare Galway</td>
<td>Athenry</td>
<td>091-845804</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mayo</td>
<td>Ballina</td>
<td>087-6951432</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Donegal Sligo Leitrim</td>
<td>Ballymote</td>
<td>071-9183369</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

This is a busy time of the year for farmers, with a lot of machinery work associated with fertiliser, slurry spreading and silage harvesting, along with work taking place with spraying crops.

Given the nature of this work, there will always be a need for people to visit the farm.

On many farms, this involves contractors spreading slurry or vets tending to sick animals.

It is important to be conscious of the necessary precautions to avoid the spread of coronavirus and ensure these precautions are implemented. It is important that we, as farmers, have a conversation with these individuals before the job starts, in order to properly plan and organise with coronavirus precautions in mind. Teagasc advisors are available at the end of the phone for advice and support during this challenging time. Office consultations and farm visits are also taking place by appointment at clients request for urgent issues.

The ‘Community Call’
The “Community Call” is a major initiative that links local and national government with the community and voluntary sectors. It is a mobilisation of both state and voluntary resources to combat the effects of COVID-19.

The purpose of the call is to coordinate community activity, direct community assistance where it is needed and marshal the volunteering energy of the country. Contact your county council to access the service.

Follow public health directions
This pandemic will pass, but it needs the continued commitment of all people to defeat COVID-19. The virus needs to gain entry to the human body to survive. This takes place primarily through the respiratory system. For instance, soap and water used correctly in hand washing kills the virus by destroying its fatty outer layer. Keep up-to-date and follow all public health guidelines related to coronavirus.