

CLEANERS AND JANITORS

Confronting COVID-19

Working during the COVID-19 pandemic? Concerned about your health and safety? Health and safety law says **your employer must take every reasonable precaution to protect you**. But what is reasonable in the circumstances and follows Public Health directives? The precautionary principle should guide all actions. In other words, the absence of scientific certainty should not prevent prudent actions. Consider the following.

According to health and research authorities the COVID-19 virus can survive on surfaces for hours and even days depending on the surface. Generally, the harder the surface the longer it lasts. As such, proper cleaning and disinfecting is crucial to prevent the spread of the virus. While we have developed a number of cleaning and disinfecting related information resources, which we have posted with others to our [COVID-19 web hub](#), this resource is intended to help safeguard the health of workers who perform these critical tasks. Specifically, it is intended for cleaners and janitors who work in spaces other than health care facilities. **The recommendations below** are offered **in addition to general recommendations** included in our document entitled, *Safeguards for Workers Confronting COVID-19*, and also posted to our COVID-19 web hub.

Precautions when using or preparing cleaning and disinfecting solutions:

- Review safety data sheets (SDS) for all cleaners and disinfectants to be used.
- Wherever possible consider using safer cleaning and disinfecting solutions whose active ingredients include ethanol, isopropanol (isopropyl alcohol), hydrogen peroxide, L-Lactic acid, or citric acid.
- When preparing solutions (especially bleach), always follow manufacturer's instructions for proper use of products — such as recommended dilution, material compatibility, storage, shelf-life, and safe use and disposal.
- Wear personal protective equipment (PPE), especially appropriate gloves, as indicated on the manufacturer's instructions or safety data sheets (SDS) (for general advice see below).
- Never mix bleach with ammonia or any other cleaner, in fact do not mix any cleaning chemicals, as they may create a hazardous and even deadly gas.

Please note: All workers, including cleaners and janitors, must be properly trained in Globally Harmonized WHMIS. Namely, this training must result in the workers being able to use information required by WHMIS to protect their health and safety [s. 7(3), WHMIS Reg.]. This training must be developed and implemented in consultation with the joint health and safety committee or health and safety representative. See Workers Health & Safety Centre [WHMIS Resources](#) for details.

Precautions before, during and after cleaning and disinfecting:

- Close off the area to other people and wait as long as possible before cleaning and disinfection. (at least 30 minutes if routine or 24 hours if responding after a person is suspected, presumed or confirmed as infected with COVID-19. However, waiting 72 hours is ideal in this latter situation.)
- Open outside doors and windows to increase air circulation and enhance the ventilation system where possible. (See our document on same.)
- Do not touch your face or hair at any time after you start cleaning and before removing gloves.
- Do not use compressed air or water sprays to clean potentially contaminated surfaces as these techniques may suspend the virus into the air.
- Do not shake dirty laundry. (This way you minimize potential of dispersing the virus through the air.)
- Use gloves appropriate in the circumstances. If using disposable gloves, they should be changed after a certain period of time or after cleaning a single room or area (specifics should be determined by workplace policy with input from JHSC or health and safety representative). After use, [remove and dispose of gloves safely](#) in a plastic-lined, non-touch (or open) waste bin. If re-usable gloves are used, ensure they are cleaned and disinfected after cleaning a room or area (specifics of this should also be determined by workplace policy).

- Properly wash or sanitize hands immediately before putting on gloves and after removal
- If soap and water are not available, use an alcohol-based hand sanitizer that contains at least 60 per cent alcohol
- Wash clothing worn in accordance with manufacturer's instruction, using the warmest appropriate water setting for the items and dry items completely.

(Re-useable (washable) clothing should be laundered afterwards.)

- ✓ Shoe covers (dispose after use or launder) or dedicated shoes that can be cleaned and disinfected
- ✓ Fit tested N-95 respirator or higher level of respiratory protection such as a powered air purifying respirator (PAPR), if cleaning and disinfecting an area where a suspected, presumed or confirmed person with COVID-19 worked or visited.

Personal Protective Equipment

In health care settings personal protective equipment (PPE) is essential for all interactions with suspected, presumed or confirmed COVID-19 patients. In other workplaces and public spaces, the same level of PPE may not be necessary to protect against COVID-19 virus. Some PPE can cause a false sense of security, offers limited protection and can also increase the risk of infection if used improperly.

The position taken by public health authorities however, with respect to the use of non-medical masks and face coverings has evolved significantly, especially in non-health care work settings. In fact, the **universal use of masks or face coverings is now mandatory** in Ontario in all indoor public spaces, workplaces (even those not open to the public), on public transit and anywhere physical distancing is a challenge.

Public health authorities warn though, non-medical masks, nor PPE alone will prevent the spread of the COVID-19 virus and must be used as part of a continuum of controls including enhanced ventilation, physical or social distancing, thorough cleaning and disinfection of surfaces and frequent hand hygiene.

Before implementing public health measures or resorting to PPE, employers should first work with joint health and safety committees, worker health and safety representatives (and union reps where applicable) to examine all the ways in which workers may be exposed to the COVID-19 virus. Then consider the precautions promoted by public health authorities and how best to implement them. Remember when PPE is deemed necessary, great care must be taken in its selection, use, cleaning and disposal.

Examples of appropriate PPE for cleaners includes:

- ✓ Gloves, compatible with disinfectant products being used. Ensure proper fit. (Gloves that are too big can allow water, chemicals or the virus to enter. Gloves that are too small can rip or tear.)
- ✓ Face masks (For additional advice on selection, care and use, see our fact sheet on respiratory protection.)
- ✓ Face shields if there is a potential for splash
- ✓ Disposable gowns or if gowns are not available, coveralls, aprons or work uniforms can be worn

Prior to any cleaning tasks, training on proper use and limitations of personal protective equipment (PPE) must be provided, including putting on and removal of PPE, proper disposal, and how to properly clean, disinfect and maintain reusable PPE after and between uses.

Training and Information

Keeping workers, customers and other third parties informed about the most current information about COVID-19 including precautionary measures is critical. Consider posting at entrances, checkouts, washrooms, hand washing/sanitizing stations, lunch rooms and other highly travelled public areas guidance on proper hand hygiene, proper cough and sneeze etiquette, cleaning and disinfecting and social distancing along with the screening protocol that must be in place prior to entering establishments.

In addition to WHMIS and PPE training mentioned above, by law, employers must provide information and instruction to workers to protect their health and safety. Training is a key way employers meet this obligation. WHSC COVID-19 training, offered through WHSC virtual classrooms, can assist workplaces seeking to achieve compliance. Properly trained, certified JHSC members are also mandatory and critical to securing safer, healthier workplaces.

Further Questions or Concerns?

Review our extensive COVID-19 resources at: www.whsc.on.ca.

Need more help still?

Contact your worker member of the joint health and safety committee, worker representative, union representative if you have one, or Workers Health & Safety Centre at contactus@whsc.on.ca or **1-888-869-7950**.

Additional advice from Ontario's Ministry of Labour, Training and Skills Development

OVERVIEW

Employers and constructors have obligations to protect workers from hazards in the workplace as set out in the *Occupational Health and Safety Act* (OHSA) and its regulations and the directives coming from the Chief Medical Officer of Health.

Workers should raise any concerns to their:

- supervisor
- joint health and safety committee
- health and safety representative.

This will help ensure the employer has taken all reasonable precautions.

Ontario is currently in the midst of a global pandemic. While the COVID-19 situation is changing rapidly, the legislation and regulations used to govern Ontario's workplaces are not.

Under Ontario law, employers have the duty to keep workers, work sites and all workplaces safe and free of hazards. Workers have the right to refuse unsafe work. If health and safety concerns are not resolved internally, a worker can seek enforcement of their rights with the ministry's Health and Safety Contact Centre at 1-877-202-0008. Failure of the employer or constructor to comply with the OHSA and its regulations could result in a stop-work order upon inspection by the Ministry of Labour, Training and Skills Development.

BEST PRACTICES

These are covered in the Workers Health & Safety Centre document above. Other WHSC COVID-19 resources found at www.whsc.on.ca.

For more information on worker's rights and employer obligations under health and safety law, including the worker right to refuse unsafe work, check out Workers Health & Safety Centre [online worker OHS rights posters](#) or the [Frequently Asked Questions](#) section of the WHSC website.

RESOURCES

Stay updated with daily government updates on COVID-19:

[Government of Ontario](#)

[Government of Canada](#)

[Public Health Ontario](#).