

# CONSTRUCTION WORKERS



## CONFRONTING COVID-19

Updated December 2020



Working during the COVID-19 pandemic?  
Concerned about your health and safety?



**TRAINING**

▶ THE RIGHT THING. THE RIGHT WAY.

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.

## HYGIENE AND CLEANING

Hygiene is essential. Hygiene notices (i.e., avoid touching your face, sneeze/cough etiquette and proper hand washing) should be posted at all worksite entry points, site-trailers, washrooms, and hand washing stations.

**Enhanced cleaning and disinfecting** is also a must considering health and research authorities agree 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.) Thorough cleaning and disinfecting should take place between shifts and at other times as deemed necessary (at least twice daily), especially commonly touched surfaces (i.e., washrooms, site-trailers, door handles, hoists, elevator buttons).

[Health Canada](#) and the [U.S. EPA](#) offer lists of acceptable disinfectant products for use against the COVID-19 virus. However, 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.

For projects located indoors, **enhanced ventilation**, filtration and maintenance is equally important. For details, see the Workers Health & Safety Centre (WHSC) resource sheet entitled, [Enhanced Ventilation: Prudent actions to help control airborne COVID-19 transmission](#).

**You should also have ready access to:**

- ▶ Hand washing facilities with clean running water, soap and single-use hand towels
- ▶ Time for frequent and thorough hand washing
- ▶ Hand sanitizer containing at least 60 per cent alcohol for use when hand washing facilities are not accessible ([Health Canada](#) offers a list of recalled hand sanitizing products you should not use.)
- ▶ Tissues to catch coughs and sneezes
- ▶ Non touch (or open) waste disposal receptacles (plus adequate waste disposal at shift change)
- ▶ Single-use disinfecting wipes or disinfectant products and paper towels for use during work shifts on commonly touched surfaces, especially shared equipment (Be sure to wash or sanitize hands too following disinfecting surfaces.)
- ▶ Clean work wear (This includes hand and other protection normally used to protect against work hazards other than COVID-19. Clean/laundry as soon as possible after use. Launder in accordance with manufacturer's instruction, using the hottest appropriate water setting and dry items completely.)



## SOCIAL (PHYSICAL) DISTANCING

Self-isolation for those with COVID-19 or those experiencing symptoms or those who were exposed to a presumed or confirmed case is essential. In fact, for construction workers or suppliers coming to the site, employers are required to implement a [screening process](#) prior to arrival or when they first arrive at the worksite. **Should anyone fail the screening, they should be denied entry and advised to self-isolate**, call their health care provider or Telehealth Ontario (1.866.797.0000) for additional guidance on whether or not they require a COVID-19 test.

Employers should also dedicate a location to isolate people who become ill at work until they can leave. (Surgical masks should be provided to these workers to help catch potentially infected droplets.)

For information on when workers are cleared to re-enter the workforce, consult Ontario's Ministry of Health [guidance document](#).

**PLEASE NOTE:** Employers must report all known, work-related, positive test results for COVID-19 (in writing and within four days), to the Ministry of Labour, the joint health and safety committee or health and safety representative, and trade union (if applicable).

**Ensuring at least two metres distance** between all persons on site is also critical. To achieve this and other social distancing measures, employers should:

- ▶ Reduce numbers of persons on the worksite (i.e., cease non-essential work; stagger work hours; stagger lunch/breaks, stagger work crew assignments), this is especially important on smaller sites or in confined areas (i.e., elevators, stairwells and site trailers)
- ▶ Limit unnecessary on-site contact between workers and between workers and outside service providers
- ▶ Consider installing markers to help communicate the need to physical distance
- ▶ Hold meetings such as toolbox talks outside and encourage physical distance during these meetings and at muster points as well
- ▶ Assign a dedicated set of tools to each worker wherever possible
- ▶ Assign one worker to handle materials wherever possible
- ▶ Assign one operator per piece of heavy equipment per shift
- ▶ Allow for more parking so workers can drive to the site on their own and avoid carpooling.



## PERSONAL PROTECTIVE EQUIPMENT (PPE)

Before using 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 on site may be exposed to the COVID-19 virus. Then consider the precautions promoted by public health authorities, including those mentioned above, and how best to implement them.

Remember when PPE is deemed necessary, **great care must be taken** in its selection, use, cleaning, laundering and disposal. Also keep in mind, some PPE can cause a false sense of security, offers limited protection and can also increase the risk of infection if used improperly. For instance, for most non-health care workers, including construction workers, nitrile (synthetic rubber) **gloves to protect against COVID-19 are not advised**, in most cases they only serve to spread the virus. The [World Health Organization](#) and [Public Health Agency of Canada](#) advises hand washing/sanitizing offers superior protection. Gloves worn to protect against other common hazards on construction sites however, should be maintained. During breaks consider storing work gloves in a bag and like other work wear wash them daily.

In terms of **non-medical masks and face coverings**, the position taken by public health authorities has evolved significantly, especially in non-health care work settings. The [U.S. Centers for Disease Control and Prevention](#) (CDC), for instance, now recognizes these masks as both a source control blocking the release of exhaled respiratory droplets and aerosols and as personal protection for the mask wearer. They add however the level of mask protection is dependent on design, fit and materials used. See the [WHSC COVID-19: Respiratory and Eye Protection](#) resource document for details.

**PLEASE NOTE:** Any mask designed with an exhale valve should not be used to protect against COVID-19, as the valve has the potential to emit the virus if present. If using an industrial N95 mask designed with an exhale valve to protect against a hazard other than COVID-19, then wear another mask over it.

Here in Ontario, the **universal use of masks** or face coverings that cover the nose, mouth and chin is [now mandatory](#) in all indoor public spaces, including workplaces (even those not open to the public). Outdoor workplaces do not require masks and face coverings to protect against the COVID-19 virus. However, if physical distancing cannot be maintained for some aspect of the job, then a mask or face covering should be worn while carrying out this task. Without protection, tasks that require exertion and cause heavier breathing are especially likely to spread transmission of any virus present.

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 **wide range of controls**, including enhanced ventilation, physical distancing, thorough cleaning and disinfection of surfaces and frequent hand hygiene.

## TRAINING AND INFORMATION

Keeping construction workers, their representatives and supervisors informed about the most current information about COVID-19 including precautionary measures is critical. In addition to prominently displayed information outlining proper hand hygiene and proper cough and sneeze etiquette as mentioned above, consider posting at the work site cleaning and disinfecting protocols, plus physical distancing and screening measures. **Daily toolbox talks** to discuss these and other protective measures can also keep the focus on prevention.

Employers in fact have a general requirement to provide information, instruction **competent supervision**, and take all reasonable precautions to protect workers from hazards, including the COVID-19 virus. Training, and not just the sharing of information, is a **key way employers meet this legal obligation**. WHSC **COVID-19 Training**, offered through WHSC virtual classrooms, can assist workplaces seeking to achieve compliance.

Employers must also ensure workers required to use PPE are trained in its proper use, care and limitations. Further still, most workers, including those employed on construction sites, must be properly trained in Globally Harmonized WHMIS. With new cleaning and disinfecting products being introduced during the pandemic the need for this training is greater than ever. **WHMIS training must result in the workers being able to use information** required by WHMIS regulation 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.

Properly trained, **certified JHSC members** are also mandatory and critical to securing safer, healthier workplaces.



## FURTHER QUESTIONS OR CONCERNS?

Review our other COVID-19 resources at [www.whsc.on.ca](http://www.whsc.on.ca).

Contact a **WHSC Training Services Representative** directly, or reach out to us at [contactus@whsc.on.ca](mailto: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](http://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](#).