

SAFEGUARDS FOR WORKERS

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? 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 cannot be over emphasized. Hygiene notices (i.e. avoid touching your face, sneeze/cough etiquette and proper hand washing) must be posted at entrances, washrooms, hand washing stations and public areas.

Wherever possible, you should also have ready access to:

- ▶ Handwashing facilities with soap and hand towels
- ▶ An enforced schedule that provides time for frequent and thorough hand washing
- ▶ Hand sanitizer — with a concentration of 60 per cent alcohol
- ▶ Tissues to catch coughs and sneezes
- ▶ Non touch waste disposal receptacles
- ▶ Clean work surfaces, especially commonly touched surfaces and equipment. (Clean at least twice daily, especially if the public accesses your workplace, with Ethanol, at 62-71%, 0.5% hydrogen peroxide or 0.1% sodium hypochlorite (bleach).
- ▶ Clean work wear, laundered as soon as possible.

SOCIAL (PHYSICAL) DISTANCING

Space between workers (or workers and the public they serve) is critical. **Work should be organized to:**

- ▶ Restrict people who are unwell or returning from international travel from entering the workplace (i.e. posted alerts and screening) and enforce 14 days of self-isolation before workers can return to work
- ▶ Reduce numbers of people in the workplace (i.e., cease non-essential work; staggered, shorter work hours; customers admitted in limited numbers)
- ▶ Maintain a two-metre distance (i.e., install floor markers to help communicate this distance, or employ staff to manage this distance in line ups, while ensuring this staff maintains their distance too.)
- ▶ Consider erecting plexiglass barriers when two metres cannot be maintained between workers, or workers and the public

- ▶ Provide dedicated work stations and equipment for each worker (Any shared resources must be cleaned thoroughly between use. See above.)
- ▶ Create spaces to separate people who become ill at work until they can leave.

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 working during the COVID-19 pandemic, this kind of protection against COVID-19 may not be necessary. Some PPE, including facemasks and gloves, can cause a false sense of security and offers limited protection. Improper use can also increase the risk of infection.

As such, public health authorities tell us PPE is not a replacement for social distancing, thorough and frequent hand hygiene, and clean work surfaces. Working with worker representatives (and union reps where there is one), employers should first examine all the ways in which workers may be exposed to COVID-19. Then consider hygiene and social distancing measures to combat potential exposures. Above measures are a good place to start. If after exhausting these measures, PPE is deemed a necessary last resort, great care must be taken in its selection and use.

See **WHSC COVID-19 information sheets on [Gloves at Work](#) and [Respiratory and Eye Protection at Work](#) for additional details.**

FURTHER QUESTIONS OR CONCERNS?

Review our other 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](#).