

SAFEGUARDS FOR 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 in at all workplace entrances, washrooms, hand washing stations, lunch rooms and public areas.

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). Disinfecting should take place between shifts and at other times as deemed necessary (at least twice daily).

[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.

You should also have ready access to:

- ▶ Hand washing facilities with hot 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 and equipment (Be sure to wash or sanitize hands too following disinfecting surfaces.)
- ▶ Surfaces that can be easily cleaned (Consider removing upholstered furniture, especially if it is in common areas and shared.)
- ▶ Clean work wear (This includes hand, eye 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 workers or suppliers coming to work, employers are required to implement a [screening process](#) prior to arrival or when they first enter the workplace. **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 respiratory droplets.)

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

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

For workplaces open to the public, notices should be posted at all entrances advising them not to enter if they are unwell or returning within the past 14 days from international travel.

Ensuring at least two metres distance between workers plus suppliers and the public (where applicable) is also critical. To achieve this, employers should:

- ▶ Reduce number of workers, suppliers and the public in the workplace at any one time (i.e., continued work from home, cease non-essential work, stagger/ shorten work hours, customers admitted in limited numbers)
- ▶ Visually communicate a two-metre distance (i.e., install floor markers, or employ staff to manage this distance in line ups, while ensuring this staff maintains their distance too.)
- ▶ Erect plexiglass barriers, particularly when two metres cannot be maintained between workers, or workers and the public
- ▶ Provide dedicated work stations and equipment for each worker wherever possible (Any shared resources must be cleaned thoroughly between use. See above.).

ENHANCED VENTILATION

With research confirming the **airborne transmission of the COVID-19 virus** often beyond the two metre social distancing rule, enhanced ventilation, filtration and maintenance is perhaps even more important. In response, [public health officials](#) have joined globally-recognized standards setting organizations and [some experts](#) to promote enhanced ventilation aimed at reducing airborne transmission in indoor work environments and public spaces.

The following are just a few examples of enhanced measures:

- ▶ Assess the heating, ventilation and air conditioning (HVAC) system to ensure it is functioning properly using a certified technician (especially prior to reopening after temporary shutdown)
- ▶ Increase ventilation rate and run system longer than normal (24/7 if possible)
- ▶ Use high efficiency filters (minimum value **MERV-13** or higher) and ensure they are within service life and installed properly
- ▶ Employ air purification technologies such as high efficiency particulate air (HEPA), activated charcoal, and electrostatic filtration systems, as well as ultraviolet irradiation
- ▶ Ensure relative humidity levels in the workplace are kept between 40 and 60 per cent, if possible
- ▶ Increase amount of clean outdoor air circulating into the system to dilute contaminated air
- ▶ Ensure air from the breathing zone of one person is not flowing directly into the breathing zone of another.

When it comes to health care facilities, even greater care needs to be taken with general and local exhaust ventilation. Likely the most comprehensive document developed for health care settings comes from the [American Society of Heating, Refrigerating and Air-Conditioning Engineers](#) (ASHRAE). In the wake of COVID-19, researchers and public health authorities have provided additional guidance for often overlooked health care settings like [long-term care facilities](#) and [dental offices](#).



WATER MANAGEMENT PROGRAM

While closure of workplaces and public spaces may help flatten the COVID-19 curve, reopening may present a new health risk for returning workers and others — namely, **legionella bacteria**.

In April, 2020, [Public Services and Procurement Canada](#) (PSPC) issued a warning to federal government offices about the potential for legionella contamination in any building that goes more than one week with low or no occupancy. In these instances, normal water use may be reduced creating water stagnation and other optimal growth conditions for harmful pathogens such as the **legionella bacteria**. This same hazard can occur in industrial and other workplaces shuttered during the COVID-19 crisis where processes using water or water-based fluids (metalworking fluids) have been left to stagnate.

The specific hazard for workers and the public arises when water or water-based fluids contaminated with the **legionella bacteria becomes aerosolized**. Those who inhale these tiny airborne droplets or vapour can develop a mild flu-like illness (Pontiac fever) or more severe pneumonia (Legionnaires' disease).

The [U.S. Centers for Disease Control and Prevention](#) (CDC) and Public Services and Procurement Canada are just two of many government agencies and others to issue safety directives to address this hazard before resuming operations or re-occupancy. They advise developing and implementing a comprehensive water management programs to assess, clean, disinfect, flush, and maintain systems. For more information, see the Workers Health & Safety Centre (WHSC) hazard bulletin, [Legionella: hazards in the mist](#).



PERSONAL PROTECTIVE EQUIPMENT (PPE)

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. **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 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, 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.

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.



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) and on public transit. In addition to masks, also mandatory in Ontario is PPE (i.e., **goggles or face shields**) to protect the eyes of service workers, including transit workers, if they come within two metres of another person who is not wearing a mask or face covering during any period when they are indoors, or where they are not separated by plexiglass or some other impermeable barrier (See Regulations [263/20](#) and [364/20](#)).

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

Beyond taking all reasonable precautions to protect workers from hazards, including the COVID-19 virus, employers also have a general requirement to provide information, instruction, **competent supervision**. 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 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** 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 WHSC **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.

Contact a **WHSC Training Services Representative** directly, or reach out to us 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](#).