

Infrastructure Health and Safety Association Guidance on responding to a suspected COVID-19 exposure – Workplace responsibilities for the employer in the construction industry

Overview

During the COVID-19 (coronavirus) outbreak, we all need to do our part to keep workers, customers and the public safe and healthy so we can stop the spread and prepare to reopen the province, when we are ready.

Below is a set of resources, tips and best practices to help employers and employees prevent the spread of COVID-19 and work together to reopen the province.

Employers and workers in Ontario have certain duties and rights under the Occupational Health and Safety Act (OHSA) and its regulations. Employers should also review and follow any applicable directives and guidance coming from the Chief Medical Officer of Health and Ministry of Health.

Learn more about:

- [workers' rights](#)
- [employers' responsibilities](#)

Best practices

Recognize hazards and assess risks: The first step to controlling risks in a workplace is to identify the risks. This applies to all workplace hazards, not just COVID-19. Identifying and controlling workplace hazards is required of all employers in Ontario under the [Occupational Health and Safety Act](#) and its regulations.

Some important COVID-19 risk information includes how it is spread and what can increase the risk of a worker becoming infected. COVID-19 can be spread at the workplace in two main ways:

1. person to person – by people who are in close contact
2. by surfaces or objects – when people touch their face with contaminated hands

The level of risk in an activity will be related to the number of opportunities for transmission of the virus. This includes how close people come to each other, how many different interactions

there are between people, how often people touch surfaces or objects and how long people stay in a space.

It is possible for COVID-19 to be spread by people who do not have any symptoms. This makes effective control measures very important. We must act as if everyone is infected when setting up controls.

The risk of severe health outcomes is not the same for all workers. The risk increases with age and is higher for people with [certain medical conditions](#).

Controls:

Infection prevention and control measures prevent the spread of the virus by breaking the chain of transmission. For example, [public health guidance](#) includes staying at least 2 metres away from others which avoids close contact; washing hands removes the virus and prevents people from touching their faces with contaminated hands.

For COVID-19 in the workplace, it is recommended that employers and business owners conduct a risk assessment to determine the most appropriate controls and actions for a particular workplace/situation. Reference the [IHSA's guide](#) on the risk assessment process to help facilitate this and review [Sample 1](#), [Sample 2](#) for examples.

Always start by considering the most effective controls first. It is best to begin by trying to eliminate the hazard – to remove it from the workplace altogether. Where that is not possible, use multiple engineering and administrative controls first to prevent the spread. Protective equipment (including personal protective equipment (PPE) and community protective equipment) should be relied on only where engineering and administrative controls do not sufficiently reduce the risk to workers.

In addition to the above recommendations, employers should determine whether personal protective equipment (PPE)* needs to be part of their hazard control plan. The need for PPE should be based on a risk assessment taking into account environmental conditions and also take into consideration input from the local public health unit. Although proper use of PPE can help prevent some exposures, it should not take the place of other control measures.

- Workers must use personal protective equipment as required by their employer.
- Workers should be trained on the proper use, care and limitations of any required PPE.

*NOTE: Please be reminded that most face coverings (non-medical masks) have not been tested to a known standard and do not constitute PPE. In some circumstances, face coverings may be used as an effective means of source control, but should not be viewed as an appropriate substitute for physical distancing in the workplace.

- Plan ahead to prevent the potential transmission of the virus between workers.
- Have washroom facilities available for all workers to wash their hands.

- Plan work and work crews to facilitate physical distancing where possible and use PPE where distancing might not be practical.

Upon learning of a suspected case of COVID-19, you should ensure the supervisor has implemented the protocols for responding to the situation.

As the employer, you and the constructor both share responsibilities to protect workers on a project and should work together. To this end, the response should include the following measures:

- Ensure that the supervisor is aware of and understands workplace policy and protocols that should be implemented on-site regarding COVID-19.
- Ensure the supervisor has requested that the worker with suspected COVID-19 leave the workplace immediately, return home, self-isolate as recommended by public health officials, and seek medical advice.
- Advise the worker of any assistance available for workers in self-isolation.
- Advise your supervisor about how and what they may say to workers who may have come into contact with the suspected case, taking into consideration confidentiality issues. You may seek guidance on this matter from independent legal counsel and your local public health unit.
- Have the supervisor conduct a risk assessment for workers who have worked closely with the potentially affected employee. Supervisors should be encouraged to enable workers who may have been exposed to take precautions to protect themselves as appropriate by watching for symptoms and possibly by removing themselves from the workplace for at least 14 days or until COVID-19 is ruled out. Determining if these other workers were exposed is dependent on the circumstances of the work process and interactions with the potentially affected employee. When the exposed workers are not direct employees, this will require communicating with the constructor and other employers.
- Ask that the supervisor identify locations where the potentially affected worker had recently been and determine how to address decontamination. Advise other potentially affected workplace parties, and close off potentially infected areas. Inform the constructor of areas of common use. Take steps to ensure the cleanliness of the workplace where this worker was working.
- Identify tools and equipment that the potentially affected worker had recently been using and determine how to address decontamination. Ensure other workers do not use these tools until they have been sanitized. Isolate the tools until cleaned.
- Your protocol for COVID-19 should identify who will be responsible to arrange and oversee any cleaning of tools or surfaces with which the affected worker came in contact.
- If you are notified by public health of a positive COVID result, support and provide information to public health officials to enable the contact tracing process.
- Fulfill Ministry of Labour, Training and Skills Development reporting requirements for infectious disease.

Evaluate:

Changes to work procedures or practices related to COVID-19 may affect the way you have routinely managed other risks in the workplace. Thus, it is recommended that you consider the various preventative measures on an ongoing basis, and review and adjust accordingly if they are not working as intended or have created new risks or challenges.

- Review your protocols on a regular basis. Ensure your supervisor and the workers are aware of their responsibilities to identify, report, and manage suspected cases of exposure to COVID-19. Reinforce your protocols if you find knowledge is lacking on the processes you have put into place.
- Look for opportunities to improve your policies or procedures/protocols by continuing to follow advice of Public Health officials in your area.
- Ensure the worker is aware of their responsibility to self-isolate and seek clinical assessment, either through Telehealth Ontario (1-866-797-0000) or by calling their primary care provider. If additional assessment is needed, their primary care provider or Telehealth may direct them to receive in-person care options.
- Keep in contact with the worker about their health and ask to share any test results they have regarding confirmation of COVID-19. You may need to share the confirmation of COVID-19 with other workers that were sent home due to this exposure or, if permitted by health officials, inform the other workers they can end their self-isolation.

Resources

Stay updated with daily government updates:

- [Government of Ontario](#)
- [Government of Canada](#)
- [Public Health Ontario](#)

Ontario government and agency-issued resources about COVID-19

Develop your COVID-19 workplace safety plan: Learn how you can create a plan to help protect your workers and others from novel coronavirus 2019 (COVID-19).

[Workplace Safety Plan](#)

The [Ontario Ministry of Health](#) is providing consistent updates on the provincial government's response to the outbreak, including:

- status of cases in Ontario
- current affected areas
- symptoms and treatments

For more information, visit: ihsa.ca/COVID-19

- how to protect yourself and self-isolate
- updated Ontario news on the virus

[Public Health Ontario](#) is providing up-to-date resources on COVID-19, including:

- links to evolving public health guidelines, position statements and situational updates
- synopsis of key articles updating on the latest findings related to the virus
- recommendations for use of personal protective equipment
- information on infection prevention and control
- testing information
- other public resources

Other COVID-19 resources

[Health Canada](#) outlines the actions being taken by the Government of Canada to limit spread of the virus, as well as what is happening in provinces and communities across the country. It also maintains a live update of the number of cases by province.

The [World Health Organization](#) is updating the latest guidance and information related to the global outbreak and spread beyond Canadian borders.

It also provides the most up-to-date information on:

- current research and development around the virus
- a COVID-19 situation “dashboard”
- emergency preparedness measures
- live media updates on the spread of the virus

This resource does not replace the *Occupational Health and Safety Act* (OHSA) and its regulations, and should not be used as or considered legal advice. Health and safety inspectors apply the law based on the facts in the workplace.