

Infrastructure Health and Safety Association Guidance on performing powerline technician (PLT) tasks during COVID-19

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](#)

You should also regularly check for requirements applicable to your region, such as:

- the provincial COVID-19 Response Framework
- municipal bylaws
- orders from your local public health unit

To help prevent outbreaks, you are encouraged to develop a COVID-19 [workplace safety plan](#). All businesses operating in a region in lockdown are required to have one under provincial regulation.

[Report](#) COVID-19 case(s) in the workplace to the Ministry of Labour, Training and Skills Development.

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. The key risk factors for COVID-19 transmission include:

- prolonged exposure – spending more time with potentially infected people
- close proximity – working close to others
- crowded places – having more people in a space
- closed spaces – indoor spaces with less fresh air exchange (working indoors is riskier than working outdoors)
- forceful exhalation – activities that cause people to breathe more deeply, such as exercise, speaking loudly and singing

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](#).

Potential exposures while performing PLT work include:

- Close contact with other personnel in vehicles and during the performance of the tasks, either overhead or underground.
- Close contact with customers when addressing outage concerns or notifications.
- Handling materials and tools passed between crew members.
- Handling materials obtained from stores or outside deliveries.
- Sharing the same facilities as other staff (e.g., washroom, kitchen, locker rooms, staff lounges, vehicles, shop areas, stores, stations, etc.).

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](#) and [Sample 2](#) for examples.

Always start by considering the most effective controls first. It is best to begin by trying to

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

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 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. Note: If physical distance and separation cannot be maintained, workers should have PPE consisting of surgical/procedure mask and eye protection (goggles or face shield).

- 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.

1. Screen for COVID-19:

[Screening for COVID-19: guidance for employers | Ontario.ca](#)

This document provides employers with an overview of workplace screening for COVID-19 and information to help them make decisions about the use of rapid antigen screening.

Screening helps keep infected workers and others from entering the workplace thereby reducing possible workplace transmission.

- Question-based screening uses information about symptoms and exposures to identify people who may be infectious.
- Rapid antigen screening is used to help identify people who are infectious before they develop symptoms.

To further protect workers and help reduce transmission, workers who have passed screening must continue to follow all public health and workplace control measures including masking and maintaining physical distance.

2. Maintain physical distancing.

Physical distancing means maintaining a distance of at least 2 metres (6 feet) between persons. By maintaining physical distancing, you are less likely to be exposed to a respiratory virus.

- Always practice physical distancing between coworkers, contract staff, and customers
 - in the shop area

- during truck set-up and job review
- during scheduled breaks
- during teardown of work site and return to shop or reporting facility.
- Ensure the worksite is large enough to allow for physical distancing, as well as to keep members of the public at a safe distance. Should customers approach the work area, instruct them to adhere to strict physical distancing requirements and ensure you do not approach customer premises for any reason.
- Travel to and from the work site in separate vehicles.
- Note: If physical distance and separation cannot be maintained, workers should have PPE consisting of surgical/procedure mask and eye protection (goggles or face shield).

3. Minimize sharing of tools and equipment.

- Perform verbal tailboard talk prior to starting task, with employees providing signatures using their own pen – avoid sharing pens or pencils.
- Limit the transfer of tools and materials between yourself and coworkers, as documented in the job plan/ tailboard.
- Do not share rubber gloves and PPE.
- Upon returning to shop area or reporting facility, ensure trucks and equipment are properly disinfected to minimize transfer of any possible contaminants. If it's practical, workers should use the same vehicle each day.

4. Follow PLT procedures. As an employee you have the right to know, the right to participate, and the right to refuse unsafe work. Ensure all proper protocols are followed for all situations, including informing the JHSC of any concerns.

- Only perform tasks assigned by your supervisor. If these tasks are deemed necessary, ensure that the required materials are not transferred to prevent contamination (e.g., pick up materials from the established staging area, where physical distancing can be maintained).
- If close proximity is normally required for a task, ensure the best option is utilized to maintain physical distancing (e.g., using two trucks to perform a task, as opposed to two PLTs in a double bucket truck).
- If physical distancing is not an option for a required task, precautions must be adhered to and appropriate measures taken to protect yourself. Contact your supervisor for further instructions (e.g., PPE requirements).
- Ensure enough cleaning supplies and materials and PPE are available for your task so that tools and equipment can be disinfected for the next shift.
- Ensure notifications from JHSC and other business or trade related information is communicated, electronically if possible, to all fellow staff on a regular basis.
- Create a dialogue with all staff involved in the task about their physical and mental well-being (stress at home and stress surrounding COVID-19 should not be dismissed, as everyone reacts differently to stressful situations). Encourage fellow staff to utilize EAP program as necessary.

5. Practice good hygiene. Health Canada recommends following these basic hygiene practices:

- Wash hands frequently with soap and water for at least 20 seconds frequently throughout the day, or whenever you suspect you have been in contact with an infected piece of equipment or tool.
- If using hand sanitizers, they must be alcohol-based hand sanitizer, with 60-90% alcohol, approved by Public Health Ontario and Ministry of Health.
- Sneeze or cough into a tissue and discard it in refuse container, or cough into your elbow or sleeve.

Masks:

Learn more about [using masks in the workplace](#) including how to select, care for and use them to protect workers from COVID-19.

Vaccines:

[COVID-19 vaccines and workplace health and safety | Ontario.ca](#)

This guidance document explains how vaccines work to protect you when you are vaccinated, why COVID-19 workplace control measures need to be maintained even after workers are vaccinated, and some considerations for employers about workplace policies and supporting their workers to get vaccinated.

Workplace controls are measures that employers use to help prevent workers from being exposed to hazards like those posed by COVID-19. Vaccines are a good complement to workplace controls, but cannot replace them. They have different purposes:

- Workplace controls help prevent workers from being exposed to COVID-19.
- Vaccines help protect workers from getting sick if they are exposed.

To protect workers and help reduce the chance of COVID-19 transmission at the workplace, it is important to maintain workplace control measures even after vaccination.

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 activities during all PLT tasks and look for opportunities to improve your processes. Evaluate your cleaning and sanitizing processes to identify any issues (availability of product, effectiveness of product, disposal of materials, etc.). Communicate or report any changes needed or any new issues as they arise to your supervisor for input and support.

Monitor your supplies. There may be extended periods of work if a weather situation or equipment malfunction occurs, so monitor your supply of disinfectant wipes, products, and all PPE to ensure you have sufficient supplies for the duration of an extended work shift.

Stay home if you are feeling ill. If you begin experiencing [symptoms of COVID-19](#) while at work (fever, new cough or difficulty breathing, etc.), you should immediately:

1. Isolate yourself from other workers and go home. If possible, avoid public transit.
2. Wash or disinfect your hands, avoid touching common surfaces as well as your face, and put on a facemask if one is available.
3. Advise your supervisor and JHSC immediately of your concerns so they are aware of the situation and can notify others who may have been exposed.

[Self-monitor](#) for symptoms for 10 days after exposure.

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
- 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.